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"William Tell *should really be released on Apple...*"

Courtesy of Twin Peaks Productions, Edward Tuckwell, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE

WELCOME

ON 15 JANUARY, Earth lost its most unearthly filmmaker. David Lynch, once memorably described by his *Elephant Man* producer Mel Brooks as "Jimmy Stewart from Mars", was a genius whose dark, pulsing concoctions have mesmerised for decades. There will never be another Lynch: losing him hits hard. But he leaves behind a body of work that will continue to entrance anyone who dares to enter the Red Room, Club Silencio or the Bang Bang Bar.

In this issue we pay tribute to him by speaking to some of his key collaborators, including *Wild At Heart* star Nicolas Cage. Director Prano Bailey-Bond writes for us about how Lynch's work encouraged her — and countless others — to embrace the odd over the ordinary. A roundtable of *Empire* writers discuss his unforgettable female characters. And our special subscriber-only cover depicts the great man in his most iconic location.

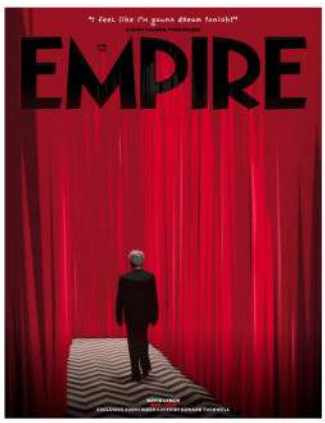
In much happier news, we're mere months away from the arrival of the new *Mission: Impossible* juggernaut, *The Final Reckoning*. How can Tom Cruise possibly outdo the last film's jaw-dropping cliff-leap? Well, we have the answer, having gone on set, visited the edit bay, and chatted to Cruise for a mighty two hours — as well as revving us up for the next movie, he revealed the secrets behind seven thrilling action sequences from the previous *Missions*. Tom, frankly you're making the rest of us look bad (though I did walk up three flights of stairs the other day). Bring on the return of the most adrenalised blockbuster series of them all.

Also within these pages: we catch up with the Oscar-winning Jamie Lee Curtis, who's getting more audacious by the day (see our stunning new photoshoot for evidence), chat to Robert De Niro about playing two gangsters in one film (no, they don't just say, "You talkin' to me?" to each other for 100 minutes), and continue our Path To Pandora with another *Avatar: Fire And Ash* world exclusive.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen



SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Edward Tuckwell

Created by British graphic artist Tuckwell, who combines digital and handmade techniques, our stunning cover pays fitting tribute to the late, great David Lynch.

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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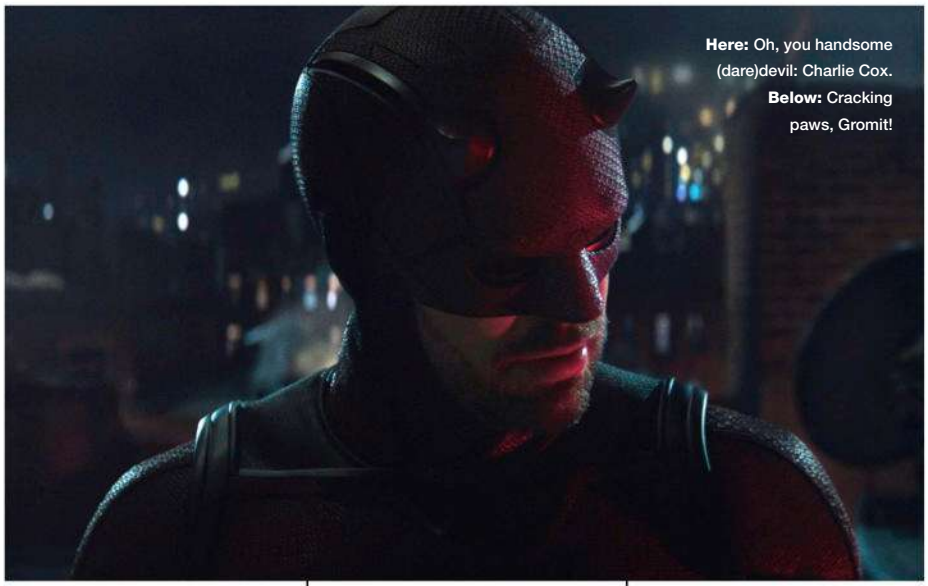

Here: Oh, you handsome (dare)devil: Charlie Cox. **Below:** Cracking paws, Gromit!

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* Not a bloody clue, mate.

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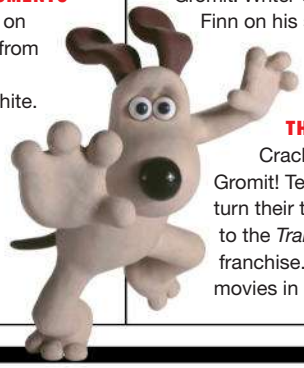

DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

CHRIS HEWITT TOOK ON AN IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

"I was lucky enough to visit the set of *Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning* last August, avoiding security by lowering myself from the ceiling. Here I am, seconds before being sent to man a radar tower in Alaska by Tom Cruise and Christopher McQuarrie."

ROBERT ASCROFT PHOTOGRAPHED JAMIE LEE CURTIS

"Jamie Lee Curtis and I found ourselves rethinking this shoot's direction. I've always believed in collaboration, and JLC's instincts made the process seamless. After the shoot, we spoke on the phone; I knew I hadn't just gained a new creative partner but also a friend."

ALEX GODFREY SPOKE TO CLAES BANG AT THE EMPIRE PODCAST LIVE

"I'd interviewed Claes for my 2022 feature on *The Northman*, and he was hilarious, so I was excited to talk to him again on stage, where he was even funnier: candid, sweary and devoid of bullshittery. Particularly on the practicalities of naked volcano fighting."

Robert Ascroft, Gareth Gatrell/Paramount, Imago, Marco Vittur. Spinelines issue 437: Newsstand: "I myself have lived here for 28 years. And I'm just beginning to know my way about." is from *You Only Live Twice*. Subs: "I've been in this army 28 years. I've seen your kind come and go. You think you know something about everything, don't you?" is from *Stripes*.

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EMPIRE

COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

LETTING OFF SOME STEAM

My brother and I grew up in the '80s and loved the Sly/Arnie action films. But having read your ranking ['The Ranking', issue #437] where *Commando* came second (and very nearly first!) — are you kidding?! It is total arse and definitely not one of Arnie's best. Yeah, it might have more cheesy one-liners than *Rambo II*, but surely nothing will beat: "Mission... (*bit of a pause*)... accomplished," snarled by an angry John Rambo!

TIM AND CHRIS WENHAM, VIA EMAIL

Thank you, Tim, Chris, and the many, many readers who wrote in with feedback on Commando*'s shockingly high place in our 1985 ranking. For your brutal honesty, Tim and Chris, have a Picturehouse membership on us. As penance, we're off to hand-feed a baby deer.*

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

Glad to see *The Substance* get so many nominations. Wouldn't it be great if a film that unusual won a clutch of Oscars?

SIMON LEE TRANTER

28 REASONS WHY

I've devoured the trailer and made numerous memes. While I'm excited about *28 Years Later* hitting us this year and the fantastic *Empire* coverage, when will we get a follow-up to the 2000 Sandra Bullock film *28 Days*? Has Gwen stayed sober or has she fallen off the wagon?

NEIL RENTON, LEITH

Funnily enough, we've heard very little clamour for a sequel to the mostly forgotten comedy-drama 28 Days. *(*Empire*'s review: two stars.) The campaign begins here!*

ON *AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH*:
This entry needs to be seen in 6D and you actually get set on fire.

@DANCHILTON.BSKY.SOCIAL

WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE WIZARDS

I enjoyed your recent homage to the great Ralph Bakshi ['Chaos Merchant', issue #437] but was surprised there was no mention of *Wizards*, which was totally bonkers but brilliantly watchable.

DAVID LEE, VIA EMAIL

Bakshi is so prolific, it was hard to fit it all in — though Wizards *was pictured. A film worth seeking out for anyone who loves watching mutant robot Nazis battling fairies in a nuclear dystopia.*

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT BIG SURPRISE DO YOU HOPE TO SEE AT THIS YEAR'S OSCARS?

Fernanda Torres winning Best Actress!

@RAFIEWS.COM

Kneecap performance.

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Sebastian Stan wins but when he gets on stage, he looks at the card, holds it up, and it says *A Different Man* next to his name instead of *The Apprentice*. The crowd goes wild.

@KYLESTEELE.BSKY.SOCIAL

They should bring a cat, a lemur, a golden retriever and a capybara on stage to present Best Animated Feature. Also they should arrive in a boat.

@JESSSCHLTN.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE GOONIES REUNION JUNE 2009

Rumours once again abound of a *Goonies* sequel, which got us thinking about the last time the *Goonies* gang were all together in person, at an *Empire*-organised reunion which was part of our 20th anniversary issue, guest-edited by Steven Spielberg.

Happily, the whole gang showed up, gathering on the set of Spielberg's Tintin film: Sean Astin, Kerri Green, Jeff Cohen, Martha Plimpton, Josh Brolin, Corey Feldman, and a pre-Oscar-winning Ke Huy Quan, plus the late director Richard Donner and executive producer Spielberg. It was an energetic, entertaining day. "This is amazing," said Feldman (who handed out copies of his new album). "Everyone looks like they walked off the set five minutes ago." Will we say, "Hey, you guys!" to these guys again?

Imago

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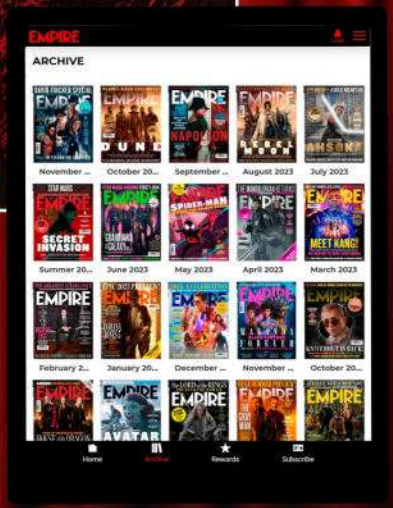

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

APRIL 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

Alamy, Imago

What Hollywood lost in the fire

THE BLAZING DESTRUCTION THAT RAVAGED LOS ANGELES LAST MONTH CAUSED HUGE LOSS BUT ALSO GREAT UNITY WITHIN THE FILM INDUSTRY

WORDS **KEVIN EG PERRY**

WITHIN HOURS OF the Golden Globes ceremony finishing at the start of January, Hollywood had moved from a state of celebration to one of abject horror. The city watched helplessly as hurricane-force winds simultaneously whipped two separate wildfires into raging infernos. In the west, the Palisades fire tore through the wealthy streets of Malibu and Pacific Palisades, leaving nothing but charred ruins in its wake. To the east, the Eaton fire burnt picturesque Altadena down to the ground. A total of 28 people were killed, 150,000 were forced to evacuate and more than 15,000 houses and other buildings were destroyed forever. Stars including Anthony Hopkins, Billy Crystal and Anna Faris lost their homes. In financial terms, the total damage is estimated to have exceeded $250 billion.

The Brutalist's Adrien Brody, who had left the Globes with the prize for Best Actor (Drama) tucked under his arm, told *Empire* he was "heartbroken" to find himself replying to messages of congratulation with condolences for people who'd lost so much that was irreplaceable. "The fact this created so much hardship in so little time is quite overwhelming," he said. "It's a catastrophic, unfathomable moment, and I have many, many friends who have lost everything, not just their homes, but all of their memories and possessions and grandmothers' wedding rings and passports and green cards."

As a dazed city attempted to stumble forward, attention turned to how Hollywood's biggest night, the Oscars, would adapt. *Hacks* star Jean Smart suggested that the ceremony — scheduled for 2 March — should not be televised, while author Stephen King announced he would not take part in voting and believed the event should be cancelled. "To me," he wrote, "it feels like Nero fiddling while Rome burns." In the end, the Academy declared the show must go on, albeit with some allowances. In a letter to members, Academy CEO Bill Kramer and President Janet Yang wrote that the ceremony would forgo Best Original Song performances and instead set aside time to "honor Los Angeles as the city of dreams, showcasing its beauty and resilience." Speaking at Sundance, first-time host Conan O'Brien revealed he plans to use the show to "put a light on a lot of the people in LA who have been affected", with the hope of pulling off something "sensitive, understanding and also uplifting".

As the fires raged, film and television productions across Los Angeles ground to a halt. Filming for Season 2 of *Fallout* and many other shows was delayed, while location shoots across the city were forced to flee. "The impact was severe," says Paul Audley, president of FilmL.A., the body that oversees film permits in the city. "We lost 50 per cent or more of the production happening that week."

On top of the thousands of personal

tragedies, many recognisable locations have been lost forever, such as *Carrie*'s Palisades Charter High School, which also featured in 2003's *Freaky Friday* and MTV's *Teen Wolf*. "Altadena was a very popular community to film in because it had beautiful Craftsman neighbourhoods," says Audley. "There are also larger buildings like churches that were filmed fairly often that are now either gone or still closed due to smoke. People really can't go back yet until the toxic waste has been cleared up."

As producers look to the future, many argue that the city must use this period of reconstruction to affirm the importance of filming in Los Angeles itself. "We don't know what the full impact has been on production yet, but what everyone has said is that what we need to do to fix this city is get more production back in LA," says Susan Sprung, executive director of the Producers Guild of America. Helping the cause is Vin Diesel, who voiced his intent to bring the *Fast* franchise back to Hollywood on

Clockwise from main: Wildfires rampage through Pacific Palisades; Firefighters battling the flames; Destroyed buildings on Sunset Boulevard.

Instagram. "Los Angeles needs it now more than ever... Los Angeles is where *Fast And Furious* started filming 25 years ago... and now *Fast* will finally return home. All love...," he wrote.

The idea is also backed by filmmakers like Sarah Adina Smith, one of the directors of the upcoming *Game Of Thrones* spin-off *A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms*. She helped launch the StayinLA petition, calling for tax incentives and a commitment from streamers to keep production jobs in LA. It's been signed by 6,000 residents, including Keanu Reeves, Bette Midler and Rian Johnson. "This is a moment where LA is really hurting, and needs some love. We're hoping this will be part of the rebuilding process," says Smith. "Los Angeles is the ancestral home of cinema, and we're poised to lose that if we don't take action."

'Til death do they part

BLACK BAG'S MICHAEL FASSBENDER AND CATE BLANCHETT ON PLAYING MARRIED SPIES INVOLVED IN A DEADLY CHASE

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

MR. & MRS. SMITH, The Americans, True Lies — the 'married spies' genre has definitely thrown up some bangers over the years. The latest entry in this niche canon is Steven Soderbergh's *Black Bag*, starring Michael Fassbender and Cate Blanchett as intelligence agents George and Kathryn Woodhouse, whose relationship is tested somewhat when Kathryn is suspected of betraying her country and George is dispatched to hunt her down. *Empire* caught up with the pair to talk espousal and espionage.

This is the first time you two have worked together, right?
Michael Fassbender: We actually did a scene together in Terrence Malick's *Song To Song* [2017], but I don't think it made it into the finished film.
Cate Blanchett: We basically walked past each other. I only got a whiff of Fassbender. But I wanted more. (*Laughs*) I remember getting 'naughty energy' from his character. I had no idea who he was playing. There was no script.

Fassbender: We were improvising. [Malick] did give me a script, but he said: "This is Starbucks-induced dialogue, Michael, so you'll do a better job." (*Laughs*) When you're improvising there's no safety net, so it was a good litmus test for [Cate and I] working together again.

Was Steven Soderbergh a big part of the attraction for *Black Bag*? You've both worked with him before...
Blanchett: Absolutely. I did a film with Steven called *The Good German*, that basically only my mother saw. But I had a great time. When you hear, "spy thriller, Soderbergh, Fassbender", you're like, "When do I show up?"
Fassbender: Yeah, Steven is a master and Cate's one of the absolute greats. And the story was so engaging. This is not the crash-bang-wallop spy film. It's about brains and emotion.
Blanchett: It's a really interesting way of exploring marriage. [George and Kathryn] have this great sexual and intellectual connection, but there's so much they don't know about each other. That's how some relationships work: "There are certain things I can't tell you, because they won't help you. In fact, they'll probably hurt you."

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

1917

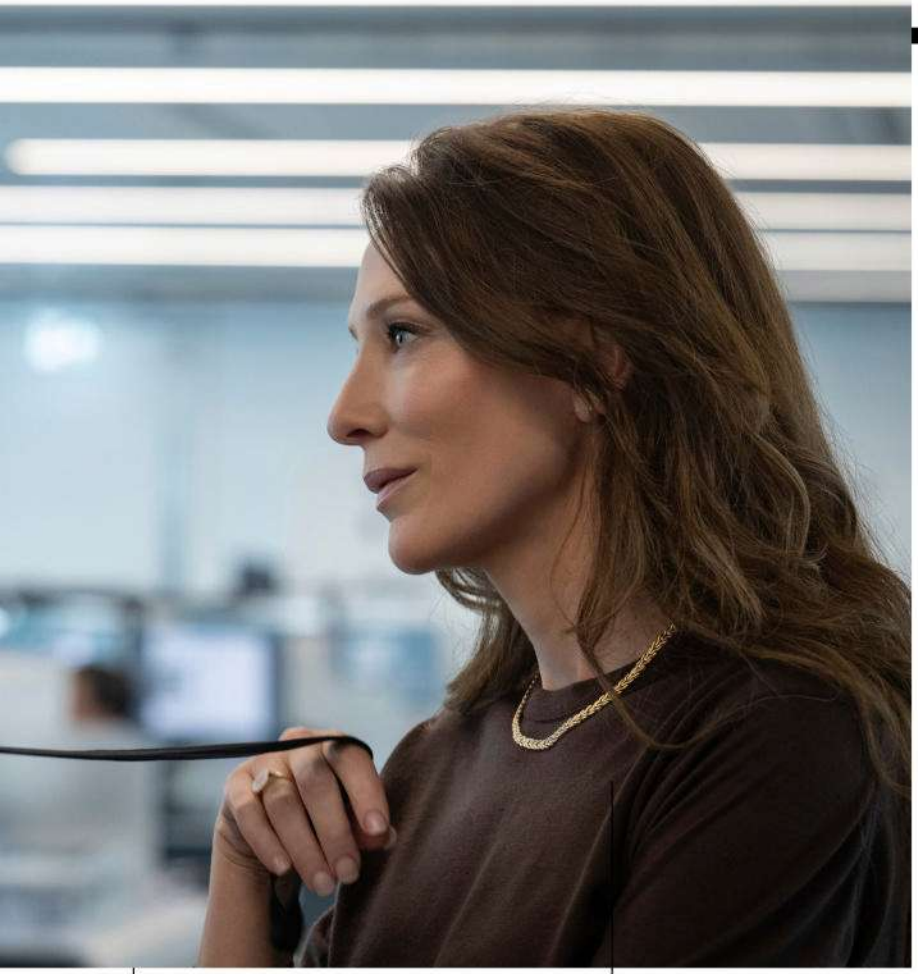
Past Lives' **Greta Lee** will star opposite Wagner Moura in a new high-concept thriller from Louis Leterrier (*Fast X*). The Netflix-bound movie will see the pair star as a couple trying to survive with their family after suddenly being trapped inside their own home.

UNTITLED JESSE ARMSTRONG MOVIE

Succession creator **Jesse Armstrong** has set his next project at HBO. Pivoting from serialised TV to feature filmmaking, Armstrong is working on a movie about four friends who meet up amid a global financial crisis. Production has been fast-tracked to start later this year.

THE CRY OF THE GUARD

Mia McKenna-Bruce (*How To Have Sex*) has joined Matt Dillon for Claire Denis' latest. Adapted from Bernard-Marie Koltès' play *Black Battles With Dogs*, the single-night-spanning film pivots around a group of construction workers confronted by a man whose brother has been killed on the job.



Clockwise from main: Eye spies — George (Michael Fassbender) and Kathryn (Cate Blanchett); It's a kid-glove situation; Is Kathryn a Faithful or a Traitor?; George and Freddie (Tom Burke) indulge in some quality screen time.

How did you prepare for playing a couple?
Blanchett: Steven likes to go out to dinner, so we did that a lot. (*Laughs*) There's actually a *really* long dinner scene in the movie, so Michael and I spent a lot of time looking into each other's eyes during that.
Fassbender: The whole ensemble was there for that scene (*including Pierce Brosnan, Naomie Harris and Tom Burke*). It was fun. Tom Burke is a keen tea enthusiast — he was going deep on tea, telling us all about it.
Blanchett: I love Tom Burke. You press his belly button and anecdotes come out.

Did you speak to any genuine intelligence agents ahead of filming?
Fassbender: Not for this, but for the previous film I did with Steven [2011's *Haywire*], I worked with a guy on weapons training and profiling. We'd sit in a bar and he'd have me profile everyone in the room, assess if they were a threat. I did it for *weeks* afterwards. (*Laughs*) You realise [intelligence agents] are constantly living with this paranoia. It's a hell of a sacrifice in terms of maintaining relationships.
Blanchett: I found it interesting that, historically, female spies have been very successful due to misogyny. No-one expects women to do a job like this — which makes them great at it.

Finally, you've both been in your fair share of brilliant films — do you have a favourite performance of each other?
Fassbender: A recent one that comes straight to mind is *TÁR*. Just excellent — a fascinating story and character.
Blanchett: The film Michael made with Andrea Arnold [2009's *Fish Tank*] blew me away. But gun to my head, it's got to be *Shame*. The front-footed depth of that exploration was just *extraordinary*.

***BLACK BAG* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 14 MARCH**

DEAD MAN'S WIRE

Gus Van Sant's true-crime hostage thriller has added **Colman Domingo** to its starry line-up. The Oscar nominee will star opposite Bill Skarsgård and Dacre Montgomery as a radio broadcaster caught up in the gunpoint kidnapping of Indianapolis mortgage broker Dick Hall.

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH

Edgar Allan Poe's classic short story about a prince trying to evade the eponymous plague is getting the A24 treatment. **Sydney Sweeney** is set to lead writer-director Charlie Polinger's "wildly revisionist" and "darkly comedic" take on the tale. Cameras are expected to roll this year.

WIFE & DOG

Shōgun's **Cosmo Jarvis** is preparing to play the son of Anthony Hopkins —and brother of Rosamund Pike — in Guy Ritchie's next feature. Reportedly a return for the *The Gentlemen* filmmaker to the duplicitous world of the British upper classes, this one sees Benedict Cumberbatch take the lead role.

SEND HELP

Rachel McAdams and Dylan O'Brien will play colleagues and lone survivors of a desert-island plane crash in *Evil Dead* maestro Sam Raimi's return to horror. Scripted by *Baywatch* duo Damian Shannon and Mark Swift, the movie has been described as *Misery* meets *Cast Away*.

UNTITLED SHAWN LEVY STAR WARS MOVIE

Ryan Gosling is circling the lead in *Deadpool & Wolverine* director Shawn Levy's in-the-works *Star Wars* joint. Penned by *The Adam Project* scribe Jonathan Tropper, the film could shoot as early as this Christmas if Levy lands his man. The Force — and Kenergy — is strong with this one.

Imago

The Spotlight

Danny Ramirez

THE *CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD* ACTOR PLAYS BY HIS OWN RULES

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

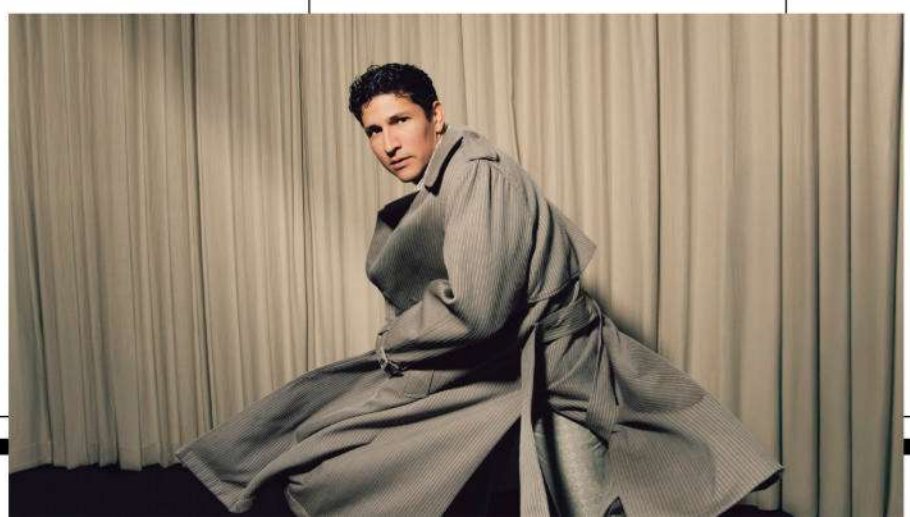
JENNIFER McCORD

WHEN IT COMES to Danny Ramirez, football's loss was cinema's gain. All his life, Ramirez had had one goal. "As a little kid, I was like, 'There's only one thing I'm going to be when I grow up, and it's a pro athlete," he tells *Empire*. A lifelong love for soccer led him to play the sport at college in Atlanta, until one day, on crutches and unable to play due to a recent injury, his life changed. "A PA from a film came in to ask if [any of us wanted to be] extras," says Ramirez. The film was *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Ramirez got to watch its star, Riz Ahmed, try to pull off some slick moves on the pitch. Before that point, Ramirez had never even considered that as a career. "The next day is when I bought all my acting books."

That was over a decade ago. Since then, Ramirez has applied the same approach to acting that he did to being an athlete. "This is a craft-based process," he says. "In the same way I work on my first touch, I could work on my emotional resonance, or people-watching, or psychology."

Career-wise, he's gone from strength to strength. The 32-year-old, Chicago-born, Miami-raised Ramirez may not have realised his dream of playing professional soccer as a right midfielder, but he managed to end up on the wing, alright. First, flying in a fighter plane as Fanboy in *Top Gun: Maverick*, and now as Joaquin Torres, aka the new Falcon, in *Captain America: Brave New World*. It's a role that he's been prepping for some time, as it turns out. "I was already cosplaying it as a little kid," he laughs, recalling a time when, as a six or seven year old, he fashioned some wings and tried to fly off the second storey of his grandmother's house in Mexico. "I crash-landed," he says. "I knocked myself out. My family were like, 'Dan, you cannot fly.' With this and *Top Gun*, I have definitely won that argument."

Ramirez's commitment to his career is commendable. He calls it "the hustle",



Above and right: Danny Ramirez, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 5 December 2024. **Far right:** Ramirez in *Captain America: Brave New World*.

BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE PODCAST

HUBERMAN LAB

"Andrew Huberman is a Stanford neuroscience professor. It's more about awareness. I was listening to him from the pandemic. At that point he had 70,000 followers. Now he's in the eight million range. He's the guy now."

THE SHOW

THE SOPRANOS

"I don't rewatch things, so I have to curate the experience. *The Sopranos*, I'm on Episode 6, and I have to remember there's a finite resource here. By the time it's the end, I don't want to be like, 'I rushed through that.'"

THE BOOK

***THE LABYRINTH OF SOLITUDE* BY OCTAVIO PAZ**

"I'm finally finishing [it]. I have six tabs open right now in my books [app]. And that's the main one. The others I started flip-flopping, and I never do that."

a relentless drive for self-improvement. "There's a joy in the challenge, right?" he says. "The hustle keeps me reinvigorated. It's always, 'What have I learned from the previous project? What do I want to do in my next?'"

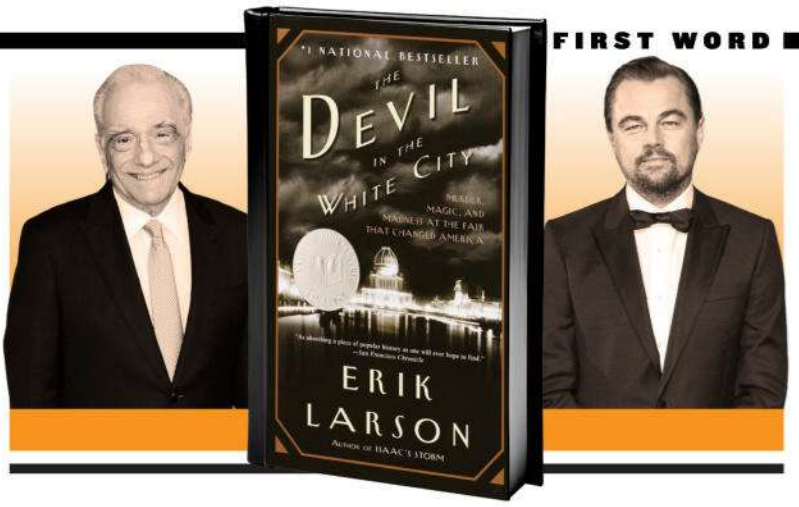
He's fearless, too. When Joaquin Phoenix and Todd Haynes united for a 1930s-set movie that would have explored the love story between a cop and a younger man, Ramirez bagged the latter role, unruffled by the prospect of the film's graphic love scenes. "Beyond the risky sex scenes, it was a moment where I was like, 'I could throw down with anyone,'" says Ramirez, who won the part after a chemistry read with Phoenix. "It was a moment where I felt like I'd arrived."

Sadly, Phoenix pulled out of the movie just five days before shooting was due to begin. "I was heartbroken for Todd, and understood that the decision for Joaquin was incredibly difficult too," Ramirez says. "I felt worse for the people that were affected on the ground. But the project's hopefully still happening. I'm hopeful that the story will be lived out."

One door closes. Another opens. The hustle never stops: next, Ramirez will be seen in Season 2 of *The Last Of Us* as Manny, a soldier with a sunny disposition ("I saw some clips in ADR (*Automated Dialogue Replacement*)," he says. "It's gonna fuck people up. It's so good."). But he's mainly focusing on his directorial debut, *Baton*. Which, despite the title, is about something close to his heart: soccer. "There was just no soccer movie that I liked," says Ramirez, who also wrote the screenplay and, via an assist from Tom Cruise, persuaded David Beckham to sign up as producer. "My soccer experience is a very grounded, visceral one. It just feels like the thing I've been prepping for my entire life." Cinema's gain might also be football's gain at long last.

***CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 14 FEBRUARY**

Grooming: Coco Ullrich. Styling: Wayman and Micah. Suit and coat: Amiri; Shoes: John Lobb. Additional imagery: Imago


#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER
THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY
MURDER, MAGIC, AND MADNESS AT THE FAIR THAT CHANGED AMERICA
ERIK LARSON
AUTHOR OF ISAAC'S STORM

HOW A SERIAL-KILLER MOVIE EMERGED FROM THE SHADOWS

OVER DECADES, THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY HAS STALKED SOME OF HOLLYWOOD'S BIGGEST NAMES

THE BOOK

2003

Upon release, American author and journalist Erik Larson's *The Devil In The White City: Murder, Magic, And Madness At The Fair That Changed America* became a bestseller. Chronicling the parallel true stories of maverick architect Daniel Burnham and ghoulish serial killer H.H. Holmes, Larson's book — a dualistic portrait of Americana set against the backdrop of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair — was lurid, shocking, and ripe for adaptation.

THE RIGHTS

2003

Within weeks of the book's publication, Tom Cruise and longtime producing partner Paula Wagner snapped up the rights to turn Larson's tome into a movie under their Cruise/Wagner banner, with a pre-*Hurt Locker* Kathryn Bigelow hired to direct. Alas, after their initial option lapsed in 2004 and a second rights deal expired in 2007, Cruise and Wagner abandoned ship, leaving *The Devil* in limbo.

THE FINCHER MOVIE

2008

A year after Cruise's departure from the project, and with Paramount now rights holders, rumours circulated that *Forrest Gump* writer Eric Roth had completed a screenplay based on Larson's book, and that his *Curious Case Of Benjamin Button* collaborator David Fincher might be keen to direct. But after two years of total radio silence, nothing had materialised and momentum dwindled once again, setting a trend for the decade to come.

THE TV SHOW

2022

Several further attempts to bring *The Devil In The White City* to the big screen — as a Leonardo DiCaprio star vehicle in 2010; with *The Imitation Game* scribe Graham Moore in 2011; and as a Martin Scorsese feature in 2015 — followed and failed, before the project was eventually reconceived as a Hulu series in 2019. In August 2022, *TÁR* director Todd Field boarded the adaptation, with Keanu Reeves attached to play Burnham. Just two months later, both director and star left.

THE SCORSESE & DICAPRIO MOVIE

TBC

Now, 22 years after Larson's book first came out, director-star duo Martin Scorsese and DiCaprio — who've both been tangled up in Burnham and Holmes' story for well over a decade at this point — are joining forces with 20th Century Studios to make *The Devil In The White City* film happen. After years spent in development hell, it looks like we're all finally going to the world's fair.

JORDAN KING

A thriller redefining 'cult status'

MARK ANTHONY GREEN ON GOING THE EXTRA MILE TO MAKE HIS DEBUT FILM, OPUS

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

JOHN MALKOVICH WALKS into a café, wearing an eye patch, in Riga, Latvia. No, this isn't the set-up for an elaborate joke, but rather an odd experience that filmmaker Mark Anthony Green had while developing his directorial debut, *Opus*. The mysterious horror-thriller follows Malkovich's reclusive musician-turned-cult leader Moretti, who invites burgeoning journalist Ariel (Ayo Edebiri), along with other prominent figures, out to his remote compound to witness him play, as the film describes it, "the greatest album of modern times". Upon arriving, she becomes tangled up in something far more sinister.

Green was interested in seeing what would happen if a musician with vast amounts of talent and influence — he looked at Elton John, Isaac Hayes and Liberace while developing the film — channelled that power into ruling a cult. Malkovich had already read the script and wanted to do the movie, an instant victory for Green. "John is really handsome and I wanted to make the bald head iconic," he tells *Empire*.

But he wanted to show just how serious he was about working with the star. "So I called his agent [and] I'm like, 'I need to see John. I'll go wherever he is, but I need to get on the plane, and I need to go see him.'" Shortly after, Green found himself on a plane to Riga — where Malkovich was directing a play — as the sole passenger. He was terrified. "It's extremely close to Russia and when he was there the war had just started. Every day it was the biggest news story."

The gesture charmed the actor (who had just undergone eye surgery) and a trusting collaboration ensued. Which came in especially handy one day on set when Green, a former editor on *GQ*, didn't like a particular look for Moretti. "I had sent a reference to Shirley [Kurata, the costume designer], but I cut off the pants because the pants were wrong," he explains. A major miscommunication followed: "Shirley prepped the outfit without the pants. It went to John pantless. No-one explained to him that pants were coming. John never questioned it."

Malkovich isn't the only one taking the leap, as despite a huge career on the small screen, Edebiri — who Green knew pre-*The Bear* — is making her movie lead debut in *Opus*. "[Ariel] feels like a new type of protagonist; a brilliant young Black woman who desperately wants to write something that people rate and take seriously," the filmmaker explains.

Green himself had been writing for *GQ* since he was 19, but has wanted to make films since an eye-opening childhood trip to see *The Fifth Element* as a kid. From there, he developed a habit of declaring every film he saw in the cinema as the best movie ever made. "Because of the experience of sitting in that theatre and having this big moment — there are very few times where you share something with strangers [like that]," he explains. "In a film, anything can happen, right?" With *Opus*, we're surely about to find out. **BETH WEBB**

Top to bottom: Ayo Edebiri swaps pastry-cutter for pen as rookie journalist Ariel; John Malkovich as musical cult leader Moretti; Making the bald head iconic.

***OPUS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 14 MARCH**

Courtesy of A24/Anna Kooris, Alamy, Imago, Netflix

THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE'
JON BATISTE

SATURDAY NIGHT

The Grammy-award-winning artist puts his own funky flavour on the TV show's iconic theme, with lavish saxophone riffs adding to the rhythmic '80s groove.

'BEAUTIFUL THAT WAY'
MILEY CYRUS AND ANDREW WYATT

THE LAST SHOWGIRL

This tender ballad is filled with lyrics that cut to the heart of the film's message of honesty and kindness, with Cyrus' raspy vocals anchored by strings and an orchestra that swells at just the right moments.

'WAY FORWARD'
JUNG JAEIL

SQUID GAME: SEASON 2

The spiritual follow-up to the first season's 'Way Back Then', this percussive piece gets darker and more intense as Seong Gi-hun plans his revenge in the hit Netflix show.

'NEVER TOO MUCH'
LUTHER VANDROSS

LUTHER: NEVER TOO MUCH

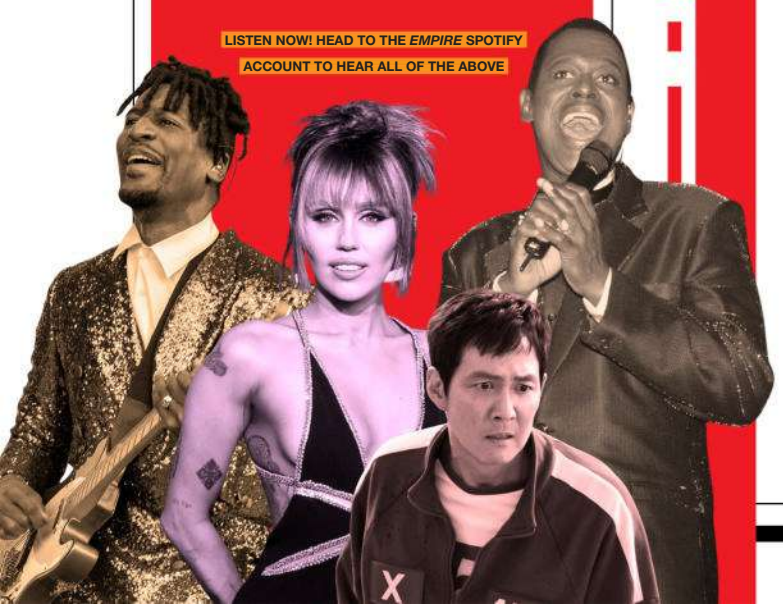
The record that earned Vandross his frontman status. His smooth vocals deliver catchy, memorable lyrics ("A thousand kisses from you is never too much/I just don't wanna stop").

'BUILD UP TO OLYMPIC FINAL/ FINAL ROUND'
TAMAR-KALI

THE FIRE INSIDE

The combination of brass, strings, and propulsive drums does well to convey the gravity of the upcoming bout, as boxer Claressa Shields goes for an Olympic Gold medal.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE



Caspar Phillipson: *Jackie*'s JFK, alongside Natalie Portman. **Bottom:** *Maria*'s JFK, alongside Angelina Jolie.

MEET HOLLYWOOD'S GO-TO JFK

IN *MARIA*, CASPAR PHILLIPSON PLAYS THE FORMER POTUS FOR THE SIXTH TIME

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT John F. Kennedy once famously said in a speech, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*." Caspar Phillipson, meanwhile, could quite reasonably paraphrase, "*Ich bin ein Kennedy.*" The Danish actor has become the guy to go to to play JFK for almost a decade now, playing the legendary politician multiple times, including for the Marilyn Monroe biopic *Blonde*, Swedish film *Hammarskjöld* and most recently in Pablo Larraín's *Maria*, sharing a short but memorable scene with Angelina Jolie. "She was wonderful," says Phillipson of his co-star. "It's full of layers, that scene: they're both living icons, but both trapped in a gilded cage."

It was in fact Larraín who first hired Phillipson to play the role, in 2016's Jackie Kennedy biopic *Jackie*. "The casting director for *Jackie* said, 'I think you could be the guy.' It turns out she was right." Phillipson claims he did not initially see any physical resemblance, until, while doing a workshop at a film school, a teacher told him suddenly and prophetically, "You have to do Kennedy someday." The actor later "studied his speeches in a big way" and read "I-don't-know-how-many books" about the man. His unique timbre, he says, "is Massachusetts, but with British tinges" — Kennedy's father was an Anglophile, and US ambassador to the UK — and he had a "very specific way of moving".

It is something of a magic spell, stepping into the shoes of this mythically famous man of history. "Once the hair and the suit and everything is on, people are deferential," Phillipson says. While filming the assassination scene for *Jackie*, he recalls how the extras on the film "just went crazy. It was incredible. Everybody wanted to tell me their specific personal story about Kennedy. It's an obsession for Americans. And obviously it's a thrill to be an embodiment of that obsession."

Now aged 54 — eight years older than Kennedy ever was — Phillipson has no plans to play him again. "But if the phone were to ring, definitely," he says. "Obviously it would be wonderful to do a project which is more about him." He remains, however, an in-demand actor in his native Denmark with a clutch of decidedly non-Kennedy roles. "That I'm known at all beyond Denmark is a huge gift. So no, I can't complain. I have no fear of being pigeonholed." Ask not what your Kennedy can do for you... **JOHN NUGENT**

***MARIA* IS IN CINEMAS NOW**

Asterisky business

TEAM THUNDERBOLTS* ON HOW THEY'RE TRIGGERING A NEW CHAPTER OF MARVEL MAYHEM

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

YELENA BELOVA

PLAYED BY: Florence Pugh
LAST SEEN: *Hawkeye*
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Guns, knives, maybe those little Black Widow wrist-zappy thingies.
SPECIAL SKILL: Pretty much all forms of combat.
WHAT'S HER DEAL? The free-spirited sister of Scarlett Johansson's Natasha Romanoff is now front and centre in Jake Schreier's team-up movie. She'll be not only the de facto leader of the motley crew but its emotional core as well.
IN A NUTSHELL: "She's a completely different person to the person that you'd assume she would be," says Pugh. "She's coming out of a few years of quite traumatic events. Where does that leave a person?"

BUCKY BARNES

PLAYED BY: Sebastian Stan
LAST SEEN: *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*
WEAPON OF CHOICE: That funky metal arm of his.
SPECIAL SKILL: Hitting people with that funky metal arm of his; also, guns and knives.
WHAT'S HIS DEAL? The veteran of the gang, Bucky is back in the Winter Soldiering game, finding that he has more in common with his new team-mates than he might first think.
IN A NUTSHELL: "There is something about this group that feels inherently familiar," says Stan, "and it's interesting for him to be in a position where he could share some of the things he's gone through."

RED GUARDIAN

PLAYED BY: David Harbour
LAST SEEN: *Black Widow*
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Whatever he can get his hands on.
SPECIAL SKILL: Brawling.
WHAT'S HIS DEAL? Harbour made a splash as Alexei Shostakov, the Russian answer to Captain America, and Yelena's dad... ish. They were positioned in America as a family of sleeper agents, something that Harbour leaned into for *Thunderbolts** while dialling up the awkward humour.
IN A NUTSHELL: "He's really fun, a bit deranged, but he has kind of a good heart," laughs Harbour. "He's in a little bit better shape — not eating quite as many doughnuts, but still trying to figure out how to live in this world."

U.S. AGENT

PLAYED BY: Wyatt Russell
LAST SEEN: *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*
WEAPON OF CHOICE: His unbreakable shield.

Top to bottom: Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen), Bob (Lewis Pullman), Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh) and John Walker (Wyatt Russell) assemble; The plucky Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan); Red Guardian (David Harbour); Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko).

SPECIAL SKILL: Punch-kicking.
WHAT'S HIS DEAL? Russell's John Walker stepped briefly into the shoes of Captain America after Steve Rogers' retirement. Except it turned out he couldn't do this all day, after being derailed by the odd spot of cold-blooded murder. Last seen being recruited by Julia Louis-Dreyfus' Val, becoming a Thunderbolt might set him on the road to redemption.
IN A NUTSHELL: "We look fucking cool," Russell says. "And last time, I'm gonna be honest, I don't think I looked very cool. [This time] they made my helmet not look like the end of a penis."

GHOST

PLAYED BY: Hannah John-Kamen
LAST SEEN: *Ant-Man And The Wasp*
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Herself.
SPECIAL SKILL: Phasing/ invisibility.
WHAT'S HER DEAL? As *Thunderbolts** deepest cut, Ava Starr, who has the ability to become invisible, seemed destined to be a one-and-done MCU character as an Ant-Man ant-agonist. But Thunderbolts, a team built on second chances, is giving her new life as the only member of the main team who actually has superpowers.
IN A NUTSHELL: "She was never a villain," says John-Kamen. "She was misunderstood!"

BOB

PLAYED BY: Lewis Pullman
LAST SEEN: This is his first appearance
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Unknown.
SPECIAL SKILL: Unknown.
WHAT ABOUT BOB? The wildest card in the deck, Lewis Pullman's character is a man of mystery who, it seems, the team stumble upon during their mission. Finding out just who he is, and why he might be a good fit for the team, is one of *Thunderbolts**' major concerns. There are plenty of theories, including one that positions him as ultra-powerful the Sentry, but time will tell on that front.
IN A NUTSHELL: "He doesn't really remember a lot of things," says Pullman. "He doesn't know how he got where he is."

TASKMASTER

PLAYED BY: Olga Kurylenko
LAST SEEN: *Black Widow*
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Whatever your weapon of choice is.
SPECIAL SKILL: Imitation, but not in the Rory Bremner sense.
WHAT'S HER DEAL? How Olga Kurylenko's Russian master assassin, who has the incredible ability to exactly mimic her opponent's fighting style, fits into the *Thunderbolts** line-up is anyone's guess.
IN A NUTSHELL: "I think we enjoy playing with that mystery," is all director Jake Schreier will say about the character.

THUNDERBOLTS* **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 2 MAY**

Peter Hirst/Fortitude Productions, Michelle Coleman

THE DAY OF THE CHUCKLE

A FORMER CHILDREN'S TV STAR TURNS ASSASSIN IN DARK NEW THRILLER FALL TO THE TOP

THE LAST PERSON you might expect to play an elite hitman is Paul Chuckle. And yet in the violent British crime thriller *Fall To The Top*, he's trading mischief for murder. "It's a very dark movie with lots of blood and gore," warns Chuckle, who is speaking to *Empire* ahead of a panto performance in Nottingham. "But [my character kills] people with psychology. I whisper in their ears and make them top themselves. People hire me to do their dirty work."

Chuckle's legacy has been defined by the slapstick comedy and catchphrases ("To me!" "To you!") of the iconic BBC children's show *ChuckleVision*, which co-starred his late brother Barry and ran for 292 barmy episodes over 21 years until 2009. *Fall To The Top*'s writer-director Peter Hirst is perhaps the only person who gazed at Chuckle's goofy, infectious grin and saw a glint of danger.

"Peter DM'd me on Instagram," says the 77-year-old performer. "He grew up watching *ChuckleVision* and had an idea I could be this character. I thought, 'Ooh, that's completely different...'" And so Hirst wrote the part of 'the Jackal' with Chuckle in mind, fashioning the tale of a street dealer who launches an audacious bid to take over as London's kingpin with the help of this ace assassin.

"I get on with everybody, I don't have evil thoughts," insists Chuckle when asked if Hirst correctly detected a darkness within. But he does admit that after a legacy defined by LOLs, he found this new kind of role liberating. "It was great fun," he enthuses, adding jokingly: "I went home to the wife and I tried it on her. It didn't work. She told me to shut up."

Top to bottom: "To me!", "To you!" — elite hitman the Jackal (Paul Chuckle, right); Writer-director Peter Hirst, as Luther, with the Jackal; Hirst and Chuckle have a ponder.

It might not play at home, but Chuckle is eager to take his new persona on the road. Buoyed by the support of fans on social media ("Lots of them are saying, 'I can't wait to see this, Paul! What a great idea!'"), he's next looking to swap gritty Brit flicks for the sets of luxurious studio movies. "I didn't have a nice Winnebago on this one, so I need to go to Hollywood," he laughs. "Hopefully I can play more dark [characters], and perhaps I can now get a gun or two." Make no mistake, Chuckle is aiming for the top.

JAMIE GRAHAM

FALL TO THE TOP **IS OUT THIS SUMMER**

On A Role

DAN STEVENS IS EVAN GREEN

THE ACTOR PLAYS A POLARISING TV PRESENTER IN THRILLER SERIES *ZERO DAY*

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

THE BLUEPRINT

Stevens had cooked up an early version of his character — a popular American political broadcaster — ahead of joining the conspiracy-theory-fuelled show. "In-between characters that I'm asked to play, sometimes — from global events [to] someone I've seen or something I've watched — a character will form in my mind," he tells *Empire*. Having grown up on cable news, he's become fascinated by the social phenomenon stemming from figures such as Tucker Carlson and Ben Shapiro today. So when co-creator Eric Newman approached him with the part of Evan and asked him to record some dialogue to share with star Robert De Niro, Stevens got straight to it. "Sometimes you're making a tape for an audition and it's a whole process," he explains. "Instead, I immediately hung up the phone, got on my laptop, and did this thing."

Top to bottom: Evan Green (Dan Stevens) presents his show; Getting ready to broadcast from his "insane" mansion; Fox News' Tucker Carlson on *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, one of Stevens' influences for his role.

THE CONTEXT

Before shooting *Zero Day* — which sees De Niro's former POTUS hired to oversee damage control after a cyber attack — Stevens headed to his politically vocal co-star's office in Tribeca with the intention of discussing the series. "He had MSNBC playing constantly while we were sitting there talking and something would come up and the conversation would divert," he remembers. "We didn't talk a huge amount about the project; we were talking about real-world events." Within the current media landscape, Stevens studied how real-life Evan-types play their part. "The power that these people have, the audiences that [they] get with their podcast or whatever it is, and the influence that they can have is pretty substantial."

THE ATTITUDE

Stevens didn't set out to imitate any particular media figure when working on Evan, instead focusing on shared tropes. "There's a sanctimony and an arrogance to them, and there's a real polished quality to them which is probably quite disingenuous," he summarises. Alongside the hypocrisy of his character, he looked at the hunger that these personalities have when it comes to their content and making it stand out against their competitors. "They're going for the most controversial take — 'the hot take' — that's going to set them apart from the rest of the field," he says. "[It] might be absolutely ridiculous, and they may not even believe it, but it's great for ratings. I think this ratings-driven behaviour is a real plague of our age."

THE OUTFITS

Evan has a decked-out everyman's wardrobe of plaid shirts and Timberland-style boots that he wears for the show, which he broadcasts from the sparse basement of his "insane" mansion to keep up appearances. Stevens worked closely with Newman and the series' costume designer to create the look, but they made a point of including a pair of glasses to undermine Green's intended aesthetic. "He doesn't look like a working man, but he thinks he is," he explains. In an age defined by delusional men in power, he's not alone. **BETH WEBB**

***ZERO DAY* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 20 FEBRUARY**

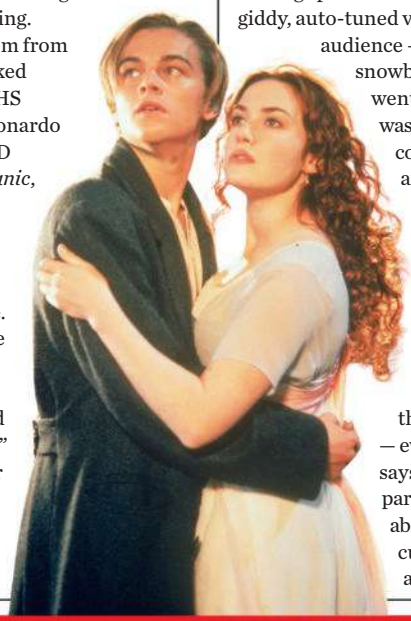
Imago, TitanicFan97, Twentieth Century Fox

THE SUPERFAN WHO WILL NEVER LET GO

EMPIRE CATCHES UP WITH THE *TITANIC* COLLECTOR WHOSE ANALOGUE OBSESSION KNOWS NO BOUNDS

WHEN IT COMES TO *Titanic* on VHS, JD — better known on social media as 'titanicfan97' — is the king of the world. The eccentric superfan (who prefers not to divulge his full name) has amassed a collection of James Cameron's 1997 epic on the now-defunct format that is fast approaching 4,000 copies, earning him a huge social-media following. Speaking to *Empire* on Zoom from his home in Florida — flanked by ceiling-high stacks of VHS copies, and two custom Leonardo DiCaprio mannequins — JD is in high spirits. "I got *Titanic*, I got Jack Dawson... Life is good," he reflects.

It's an obsession that was sparked by the film's original home-video release. "September 1, 1998, it came out on VHS," he says. "'Take the voyage home' is what they were saying. And we really did. We really did." (He prefers VHS to DVD or Blu-ray: "It's like pouring a fine glass of wine — like putting on a vinyl record.")



By 2012, JD had begun amassing a modest collection. "I go thrifting a lot," he explains. By the time he hit 100 copies, "I was like, 'We gotta make content!'" Having spent three years at film school, JD's giddy, auto-tuned videos quickly gained an audience — and with it, the collection snowballed. "All of a sudden, it went viral on TikTok. Everyone was like, 'Can I send you my copy?'" JD opened a PO Box, and was soon inundated. "I get copies from all over the world," he says. "People just keep sending them. At least 85 to 90 per cent of my collection has been donated."

The collection now dominates his entire house: "the living room, the dining room, the kitchen — every room is *Titanic* now," he says. That includes memorabilia: part of a deckchair that was aboard the real ship, a cardboard cut-out of James Cameron, and several Jack Dawson mannequins (he took one of them to Disney World to celebrate the milestone of 1,997 copies). While he acknowledges that if DiCaprio ever found out about the obsession, "it might result in a restraining order", JD has no plans to slow down. "They sold 25 million copies of *Titanic* on VHS," he says. "I'm thinking a million is doable." He will track every copy down he can — near, far, wherever they are. **JOHN NUGENT**

Clockwise from main: *Titanic* super-fan JD with just some of his vast VHS collection of the film; Getting close to a promotional poster; Stars Leonardo DiCaprio as Jack Dawson and Kate Winslet as Rose Dewitt Bukater.

ROCK ROCK ROCKIN' THIS PROMO TOUR

HOW TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET TOOK VIRAL STUNTS TO A NEW LEVEL FOR *A COMPLETE UNKNOWN*

BLONDE ON TIM

NEW YORK PREMIERE

In a niche reference to Bob Dylan's red-carpet look for the 2003 Sundance premiere of his film *Masked And Anonymous*, Chalamet donned blond hair at the screening. Whether this was a goofy move or a sincere one is, fittingly, a complete unknown.

TANGLED UP IN GLITTER

UNKNOWN LOCATION

Chalamet live-streamed a tribute from what looked like an air hangar. The strange event began with clips of Dylan projected onto a giant screen before a Black Eyed Peas track flooded the space, the actor removed his shirt, fired a confetti gun, and writhed around.

DYLAN GOES ELECTRIC

LONDON PREMIERE

Like a rolling stone, Chalamet cycled across the red carpet of the film's UK debut on a rented city e-bike. The odd viral stunt made a splash but at a cost: the BAFTA nominee claimed he received a £65 fine for failing to adhere to company parking policies.

SNL FTW

NEW YORK

In-between performing three deep-cut Dylan songs for his stint as host and musical guest on the sketch show, the actor flexed his comedy chops by playing an AI podcast host and farting in the face of an onscreen grandma, giving new meaning to blowin' in the wind. **BETH WEBB**

THE PATH TO PANDORA IN EMPIRE EVERY MONTH

This time it's war

A NEW THREAT. RETURNING FOES. AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH PROMISES INTERSTELLAR PERILS ON AN EYE-WIDENING SCALE

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

THE FINAL REEL of *Avatar: The Way Of Water* was a blast of nutso nautical action, as fish-riding Na'vi took on a giant human assault vessel, with an assist from heroic space-whale Payakan. But all that thunder, fury and sea-spray was, says production designer Ben Procter, "nothing but a skirmish". He teases that in threequel *Fire And Ash*, "we're going to see an airborne and water-borne battle for the ages, as the Pandoran forces and RDA clash in a really interesting environment".

Procter and fellow production designer Dylan Cole are two of the design wizards that help James Cameron expand his far-away universe (4.37 light-years from Earth, to be precise). Broadly speaking, the former focuses on *Avatar*'s human tech, while the latter is charged with all things Na'vi. Or, as Cole puts it, "Ben is Earth and I'm Pandora." Together, they have worked out the ins and outs of an entire world. "Each new film," says Procter, "gives us a chance to open up a door that was closed before and go, 'Check this out.'"

One such door in *Fire And Ash* will reveal the Mangkwan Clan, also known as 'the Ash', a previously unseen tribe who have suffered a great calamity. "They used to live not too dissimilarly to the Omatikaya from *Avatar* 1," explains Cole. "They had a natural disaster befall them, and that sort of helped shaped their culture. So much of the world of Pandora is rich and vibrant and full of life — this is just the exact opposite." Their land is desolate, a wasteland scorched by lava; the Ash Village resides in the ruins of a giant burned-out hometree which was destroyed by a volcanic eruption, their habitations made of charred wood. Instead of giving in to despair, however, their grim situation has fuelled anger instead. "They're not a mournful people," Cole says. "They're a bit more of an aggressive people. It's, 'This is us now. It's made us stronger and harder — forged by fire.'"

Headed up by clan leader Varang (Oona Chaplin), who rides an intimidating flying creature called the Nightwraith ("We jokingly call her Ashley," Cole says of the multi-winged mount, "and I call her Freddy 40 Fingers, like a Mob boss"), and fascinated by human technology, the Ash will be a formidable threat to our heroes. But they're not the only ones. The RDA — A-holes from Earth bent on pillaging Pandora's resources — have been regrouping since getting trounced in *The Way Of Water*.

"Jim, early on, told us that "go big or go home" is the RDA's internal motto," says Procter. And so, having had their SeaDragon ship sunk at the end of the last movie, they've upped their game considerably. The concept art above shows their new armada, clustered around a mind-bogglingly colossal, smoke-belching Factory Ship. "They built a new, monstrous machine that is twice the length-plus of a SeaDragon, and two-and-a-half times as

Main volcano: Concept art by Steven Messing © 2025 20th Century Studios. Factory ship: Concept art by Paul Ozzimo © 2025 20th Century Studios.

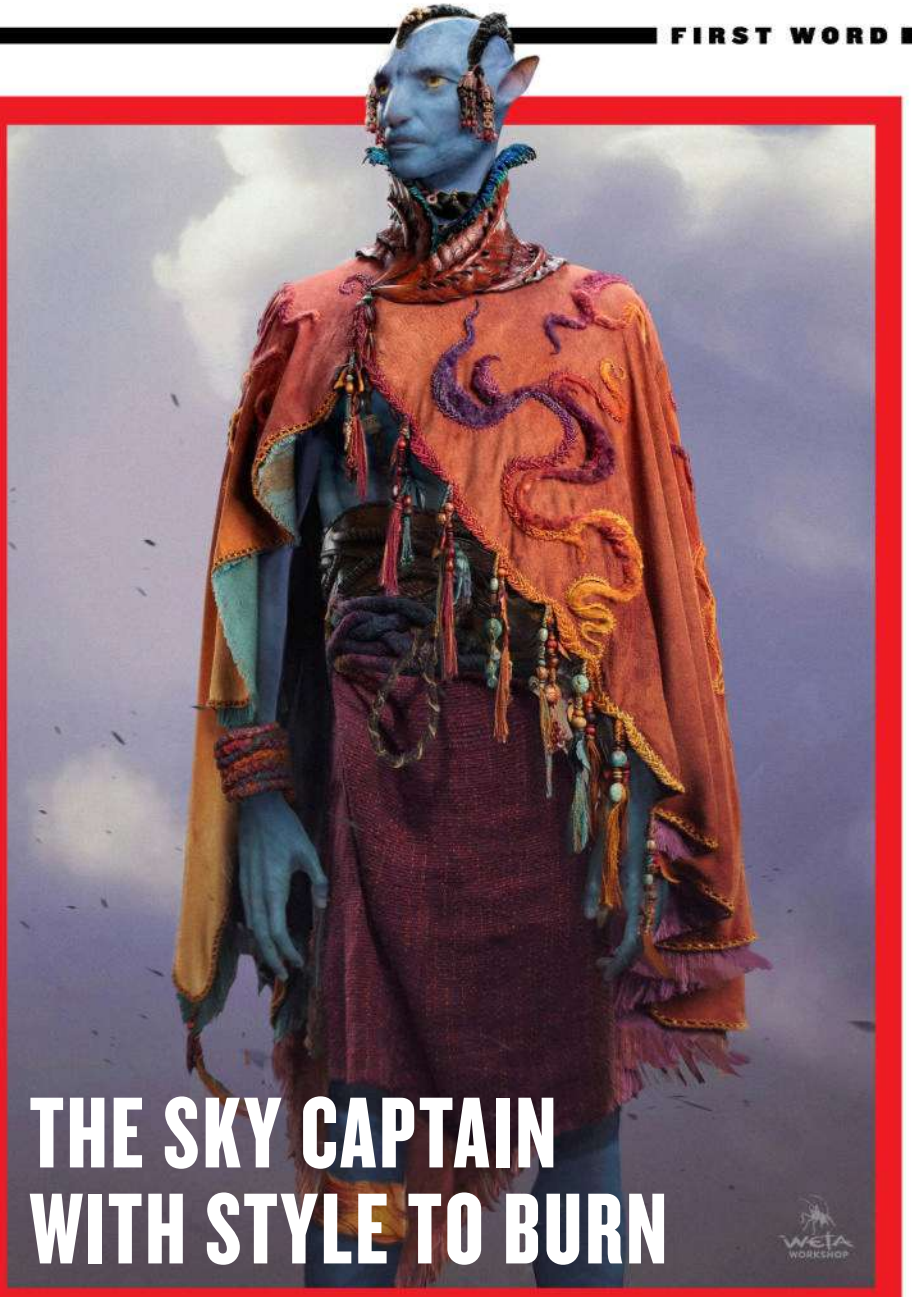
Here: A fixer-upper? The desolate terrain that is the Ash Village, home to the fearsome Mangkwan Clan. **Below:** Villainous RDA troops return in force with their new Factory Ship and its wolf-pack of SeaDragons.

Peylak: Concept art by Costume Designer: Deborah L. Scott. Costume Sample Manufacture and Illustration: Wētā Workshop © 2025 20th Century Studio. All Rights Reserved.

tall," Procter reveals. "Essentially a moving oil platform that is designed to capture and process the tulkun [Pandoran whales] on an industrial scale. The RDA sees them as a big, fat ball of money swimming through the ocean. And they've developed this amazing machine to go after it."

The battle lines are drawn. "Coming out of these vehicles is an army, and all of that leads into a war," says Procter. "At the end of *Avatar 3*, what we're going to see is something of a scale, in terms of conflict, that we have not seen before." Lava-toughened warriors? Hardcore hardware? James Cameron's biggest ever action sequence? Best buckle up — World War Eywa is on its way.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER**



THE SKY CAPTAIN WITH STYLE TO BURN

MEET PEYLAK. HE'S KIND OF A BIG DEAL

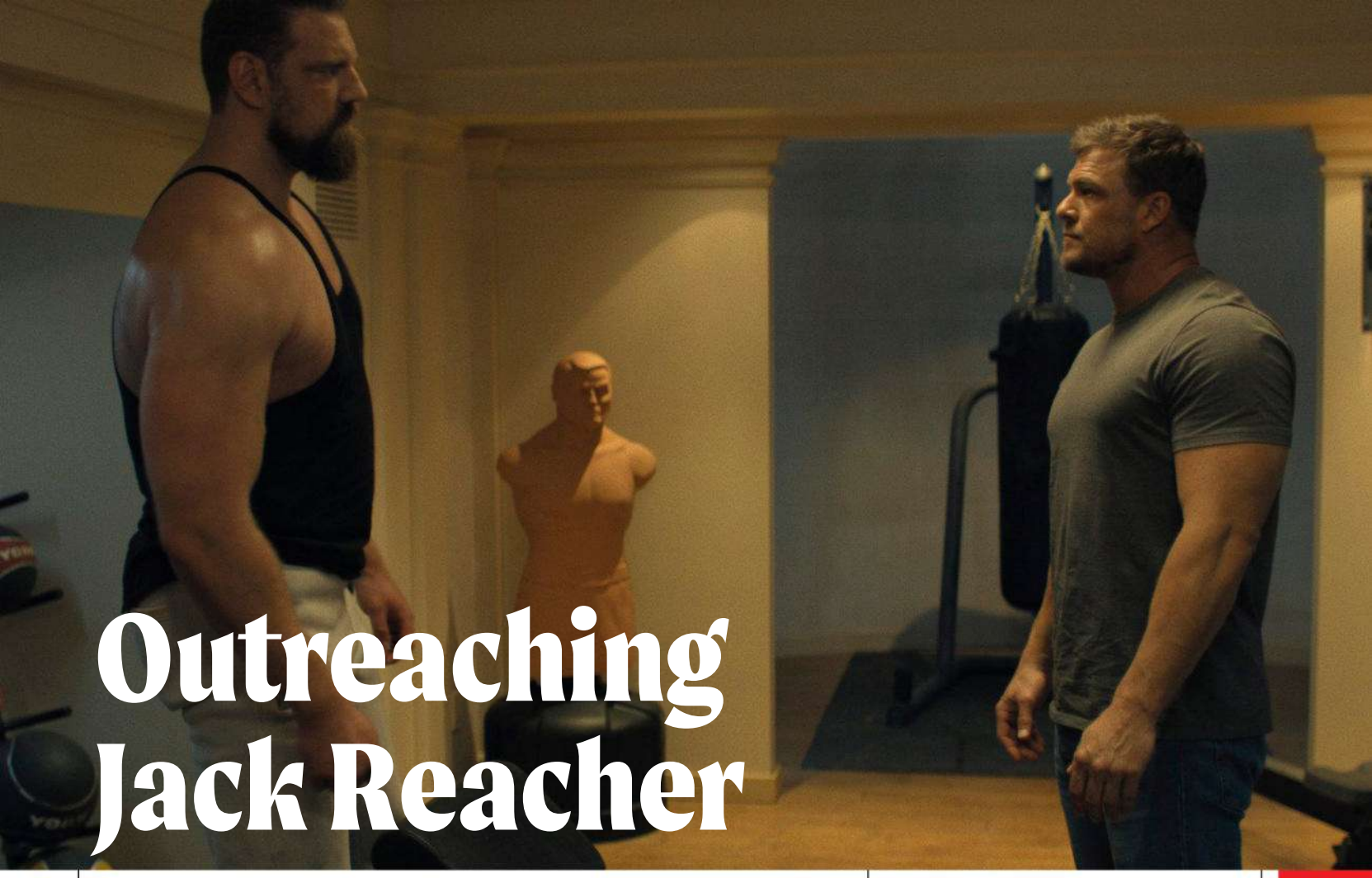
One online rumour about *Avatar: Fire And Ash* suggests that David Thewlis is playing a member of the fearsome Mangkwan Clan. Not true. As revealed in this exclusive artwork, the actor's character is in fact Peylak, chieftain of the Tlalim Clan, aka the Wind Traders, and he's rocking some out-of-this-world threads.

"They're upbeat, happy, colourful," says costume designer Deborah L. Scott of the Wind Traders. "They fly all over Pandora — whatever it is, round, square, I don't know — and they bring goods. And when they come into our movie, everyone's excited to see them. It's like the circus is in town." The Wind Traders travel the moon's oceans via jellyfish-like creatures, collecting exotic materials from everywhere they go. Accordingly, as the circus' ringleader, Peylak has a particularly exuberant get-up.

"They live at kind of high altitude; their environment is the sky," says Scott. "So cloaks were the obvious go-to. Originally, [Peylak's] cloak was a little more rugged, a little more rustic. But as all the clans developed, Jim [Cameron] said, 'I just don't think it's grand enough.' So I went back and reinvented it to be the one you're seeing here, which is very colourful and decorative. Beading, weaving, it has everything. I [also] came up with this idea of having the hair very close to the head, and not very much of it. Because when you're flying, you don't want it getting in your face."

As in a live-action film, *Avatar*'s costumes are made for real, actors trying them on and adjustments being made, before being recreated as virtual outfits. Hence Scott has overseen the manufacture of garments for everyone from the Metkayina Clan to the Ash People (their aesthetic: "Soot and leather and bone and wood"). And hence Thewlis donning a real sunset-coloured, wispy-cloud-patterned cloak to shoot scenes on the performance-capture stage. "The way he carries himself, he's got great posture," enthuses Scott. "He's absolutely stunning in the movie."

Peylak's exact role in the saga remains classified. But whatever he ends up doing, one thing seems clear: no Pandoran has quite so much panache. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**



Outreaching Jack Reacher

OLIVIER RICHTERS TAKES ON THE FAMOUSLY HUGE HERO IN THE RETURN OF THE HIT SHOW

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"THE LODGE DOOR OPENED. A guy in a dark suit stepped out... He was way bigger than me, which put him firmly in the freak category." Not our words, readers, but the words of Jack Reacher himself, narrating the moment he — and, by extension, we — meet the villain known only as Paulie in *Persuader*, the seventh book in Lee Child's *Reacher* series. He was a character introduced by Child for one reason: to give Jack Reacher, a man so large his nipples are in different postcodes, a run for his money.

So, when *Persuader* was picked as the source material for Season 3 of *Reacher*, the Prime Video show that stars Alan Ritchson as Child's nomadic troublepuncher, fans started getting excited about the possibility of seeing Paulie in the flesh. The question is: who on earth could play such a literally larger-than-life character?

"That's a compliment for me," says Olivier Richters, the Dutch bodybuilder-turned-actor who won the role. "The casting director saw a glimpse in my eyes, I guess."

If they did, they probably would have needed a stepladder. Because Richters is huge, standing at 7' 2" in his stocking soles. He's used that bulk to good effect in the likes of *Black Widow*, *Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny*, and *The King's Man*, where he was credited as 'Huge Machine Shack Guard'. But he was looking for a role to show off his acting muscles rather than his actual muscles. And then *Reacher* came his way.

"When I look at all the giants in the world they're mostly quiet, even Richard Kiel in James Bond," says Richters. "So for me to play a giant that can actually speak, that's something new."

Of course, punches will be thrown as well, with the stage set for an epic showdown between the two. In *Persuader* the book, the tension between Paulie, a watchman working for a possibly corrupt businessman (played here by Anthony Michael Hall), and Reacher, who is deep undercover trying to ascertain the full scale of that possible corruption, is palpable from that first meeting outside the lodge. Unsurprisingly, it explodes in an eye-gouging frenzy of extraordinary violence.

You can expect the same from the show, as Ritchson and Richters go toe-to-titanic-toe. "The effort they put into Reacher versus Paulie is astonishing," says Richters. "We might be a little bit immortal in the fight, because it continues for so long." The showdown was filmed over "six or eight" locations, with Richters training for five hours daily while also consuming 7,000 calories to ensure that he didn't lose any weight. "I'm not going to say we're going to win an Oscar for the fight scene, but it's going to be spectacular," he enthuses.

Paulie's fate won't be revealed until the season airs, but the experience has been unforgettable for Richters regardless. "I said to [Alan] as a joke, but it's kind of true, that he's really Reacher in real life," he says. "He has so many lines to learn, he has to perform, he has to eat continuously, he has to show up for the fight-training after filming all day. It's inhuman, what he does. It's a level I can only dream of." It may seem that way, but having given this wardrobe of a man a serious run for his money, Richters is closer to Reacher status than any who have come before.

Top to bottom: Battle of the bulge: Paulie (Olivier Richters) and Jack Reacher (Alan Ritchson) get ready to rumble; Reacher is interrogated; Paulie is a giant among villains.

REACHER **SEASON 3 IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 20 FEBRUARY**

FROM THE BLOCK TO THE OSCARS?

WITH *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN*, JENNIFER LOPEZ MAY FINALLY CATCH THE ACADEMY'S EYE

AS THE CLOSING credits rolled on the world premiere of *Kiss Of The Spider Woman* at this year's Sundance film festival, the audience took to their feet for a standing ovation. At the heart of it was Jennifer Lopez, bejewelled in a web-covered dress. "I've been waiting for this moment my whole life," she tearfully told the crowd.

The film, set in '80s Argentina, is adapted from the 1992 Tony-winning musical of the same name, based on Manuel Puig's 1976 novel. It follows queer prisoner Luis Molina (played here by Tonatiuh, who has also received praise for their breakthrough performance). In an attempt to escape his dire circumstances, Molina regales a fellow inmate (Diego Luna) with the story of *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*, an MGM-style musical starring his favourite Hollywood icon, Ingrid Luna. Enter Lopez in full Rita Hayworth mode, performing lavish, larger-than-life song-and-dance numbers as the mythical Spider Woman.

The premiere buzz only strengthens the argument that Lopez is due Academy recognition come 2026. As far back as the late '90s, when her gritty and charismatic performance in *Out Of Sight* took her acting career to new heights, she's proven a hardy and committed actor. But in 2019 it felt like awards season would surely beckon after her career-best performance in *Hustlers*. As the ringleader of an all-female criminal operation, Lopez was a tenacious and formidable

Here: Jennifer Lopez as Ingrid Luna in *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*. **Below:** And in *Hustlers*.

force. She trained for her opening number — a take-no-prisoners pole dance set to Fiona Apple's 'Criminal' — for two-and-a-half-months, rejecting the idea of a body-double for the daring and athletically demanding sequence. "That scene didn't really exist until Jennifer Lopez was on board," writer-director Lorene Scafaria said at the time.

Hustlers was a box-office hit and a Supporting Actress nomination felt like a shoo-in. Yet the Academy felt differently, not only failing to recognise Lopez but the film at all. Laura Dern would walk away with the prize for *Marriage Story*, playing into one theory that for a supporting actor to win, they need to feature in a widely nominated movie.

If this is indeed how the Academy operates, Lopez may have a fighting chance for her Supporting Actress trophy with *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*. For one, the 1985 movie adaptation of the novel earned four Oscar nominations, with a Best Actor win for William Hurt. This iteration, meanwhile, is directed by Bill Condon, whose past musical movies *Chicago* and *Dreamgirls* brought Oscars to Catherine Zeta-Jones and Jennifer Hudson for their supporting roles among multiple nominations. The groundwork has been laid. Maybe Lopez's moment is just beginning. **BETH WEBB**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... WALTON GOGGINS' GOGGLES

Forget tequila brands; in a genius move, the *Fallout* star has launched a line of trendy eyewear called Walton Goggins Goggle Glasses. Here's hoping this paves the way for Ice Cube's Eye Cubes, Sissy's Spacespecs, or even Jude Four-eyes.

JOHN NUGENT IS THINKING ABOUT...VIN DIESEL VERSUS THE ROCK

For me, the biggest drama this month came when Vin Diesel, presenting a Golden Globe award, began his remarks with a deliciously catty, "Hey, Dwayne!" — instantly reigniting the Great Candy-Ass Feud of 2016. Start your engines! Again!

HARRY STAINER IS THINKING ABOUT... BEASTY BIOPICS

Ever since seeing a chimp perform 'Rock DJ' on Regent Street in *Better Man*, I've been wondering: could other biopics be improved by having a CG animal in the starring role? An Oasis biopic with bulldogs at the centre? Or an eventual Glen Powell biopic where he's played by a capybara?

© Ana Carballosa, Imago, Marco Vittur

Taking action to biblical new heights

EMPIRE HEADS TO CHURCH TO SEE HOW GANGS OF LONDON SEASON 3 IS UPPING THE STAKES

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

BANG! EMPIRE HASN'T been on the *Gangs Of London* Season 3 set for more than ten seconds before we hear the piercing sound of gunfire. The location — St Augustine's Church in north-west London — looks serene from the outside. But today, its inside tells a different story.

The startling noise is part of an intense showdown between the Wallaces — here represented by Marian (a gun-toting, body armour-clad Michelle Fairley in full action mode) and her son Billy (Brian Vernel) — and another gang with whom they have some serious beef. The smell of pungent smoke lingers in the air. Bibles are mangled, pews are shredded, and even the flower pots are shot to hell. It's less Holy Father, and more Holy Shit.

"We've got about 20 people who meet their maker in this scene," veteran visual effects supervisor James Jordan tells *Empire*. "We're calling this the 'mid-season kick'. Everyone's excited." Since its very first episode, the show has maintained a reputation for its relentlessly gory, no-holds-barred action. And this new chapter will continue to honour that in a big way, with 15 major action sequences across eight episodes. Alongside the church-set shoot-out is a pool-hall pile-on in which Richard Dormer — who joins the show as Marian's estranged younger brother Cornelius Quinn — gets to flaunt his new signature tool: a blackthorn fighting stick. "I take my time using this lethal weapon, breaking jaws, teeth, bones, legs, like the Terminator," he says enthusiastically. "[Cornelius] uses this thing like a grim reaper would use a [scythe]."

Of course, *Gangs* doesn't just use violence for the sake of it. The rivalry between the show's two leading families has only grown deeper and knottier with time, with Ṣọpẹ́ Dìrísù's Elliot, Luan (Orli Shuka) and Lale (Narges Rashidi) among those vying for control of London's underworld. Now, the power struggle is set to reach fever pitch. "The betrayal element of this season is strong," says producer Mike Eagle-Hodgson. "The stakes are much higher for those who are creating and reaffirming allegiances."

As *Gangs Of London* has gone on, the show's aesthetic has changed, depending on the people behind the camera. Gareth Evans kicked things off with *The Raid*-esque aplomb, while Corin Hardy took a horror-style approach. With its third instalment, three new directors — Farren

Top to bottom: Ganging up again; Billy (Brian Vernel) means business; Fancy camerawork ahoy!; An unholy ruckus.

Blackburn, Tessa Hoffe, and Kim Hong Sun — also put their own stamp on the action.

"What drew me to Hong Sun was not only his feature *Project Wolf Hunting* — which [has] a lot of hand-to-hand [combat] — but a reliance on being inventive with your environment," explains Eagle-Hodgson. "Farren has done something fantastic in an episode that feels maybe more akin to the bar brawl [in the show's debut episode], and Tessa brought a feeling of vulnerability and brutal ingenuity to her action design."

Another reason that *Gangs*' mayhem is so impressive is that the actors are doing the vast majority of their own stunts. And in that regard, with the addition of martial-arts specialist Andrew Koji to the cast, the new season has a fight that fans won't want to miss. "The day people see Ṣọpẹ́ and Andrew going to head-to-head is going to be incredibly exciting," Eagle-Hodgson teases.

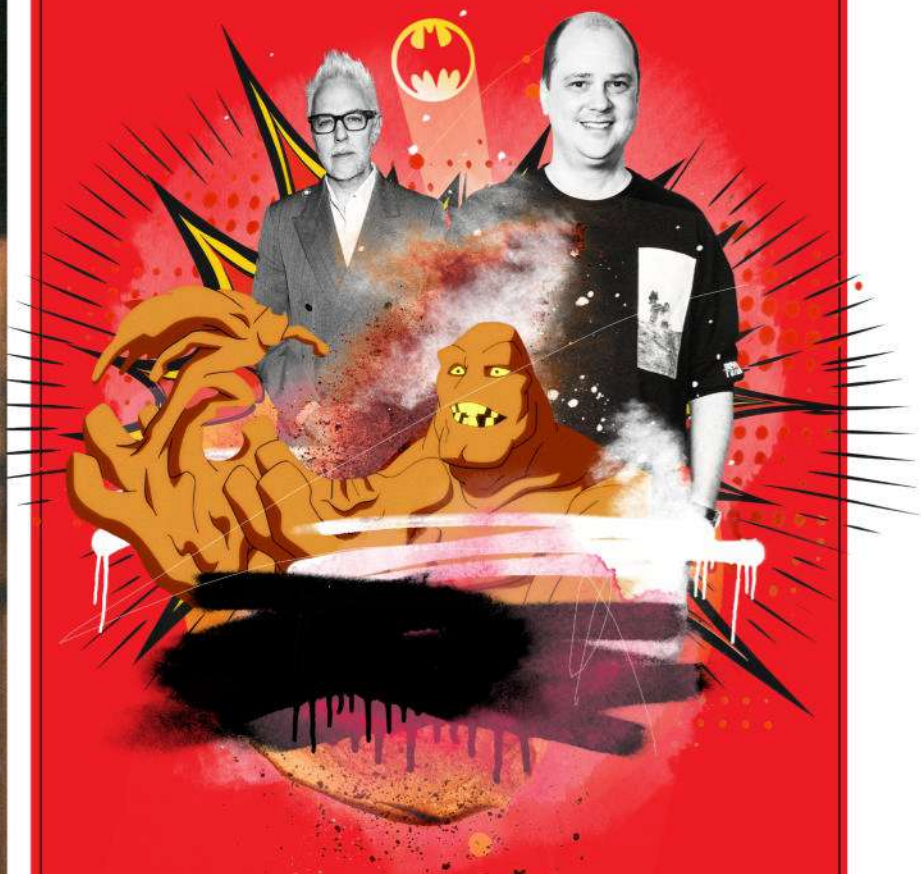
The scene that *Empire* has witnessed also promises to be an all-timer for the show. "You're standing there on day one, you're doing it by baby steps, but you're going, 'How are we going to get this done? This is mad!'" says Vernel. Chaos awaits. Grab your prayer books.

***GANGS OF LONDON* SEASON 3 WILL BE ON SKY AND NOW IN MARCH**

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... CLAYFACE



DC AND CLAYFACE GO WAY BACK

The star of the upcoming project may be a B-list Batman villain, but Clayface shares an illustrious history with the Dark Knight. Appearing first as Basil Karlo — a failed actor with a clay mask — in DC's Golden Age, the theatrical miscreant has been a comics mainstay for 85 years. Usually a wannabe thespian variously turned into a shapeshifting ne'er-do-well by serums, protoplasm and out-of-control chemicals, he's a thorn in Bats' side.

JAMES GUNN NEVER PLANNED A CLAYFACE FILM — UNTIL MIKE FLANAGAN CAME ALONG

When Mike Flanagan first pitched DC Studios' head honcho a Clayface movie, the villain wasn't on James Gunn's radar. However, after Flanagan's initial pitch gained Gunn's curiosity, his draft screenplays really captured the DCU chief's attention. "First draft is great, second draft is even better," said Gunn recently. "And then I'm like, 'Let's do it.'" It's yet to be confirmed if Flanagan will also direct the movie.

THIS WILL BE A DCU MOVIE, NOT A STANDALONE

With James Gunn's *Superman* slated for release this July and Craig Gillespie's *Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow* out in June 2026, *Clayface* — currently due on 11 September 2026 — will be the third film in Gunn's new-look DC Universe. And that it's a DCU joint is an important distinction to make, as Matt Reeves' delayed *The Batman Part II* — an Elseworlds (aka standalone) movie — is still rumoured to feature its own Clayface.

SOMEONE'S ALREADY PLAYED THE PART

Clayface already exists in the DCU — voiced by Alan Tudyk in the animated *Creature Commandos*. Now, Gunn has stated that actors who play characters in animated DCU projects will cross over into live action, too. So might Tudyk lead this film? Only time will tell. But it sounds like Clayface is about to break the mould for one of DC's underrated icons.

IT COULD BE A TRAGEDY (IN A GOOD WAY)

In a since-deleted 2021 tweet, Flanagan expressed interest in exploring the malleable malcontent's story through a "horror/thriller/tragedy" lens. Finding the humanity in the monstrous and vice-versa is kinda the filmmaker's speciality, so an empathetic take on Clayface makes sense. Emotional mud-man monologues incoming... **JORDAN KING**

***CLAYFACE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 SEPTEMBER 2026**

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Christina Hendricks

THE *SMALL TOWN, BIG STORY* STAR PONDERS THE PRICE OF DAIRY AND PERILS OF THE OCEAN

WORDS **LEILA LATIF**

ARNO

Which movie have you seen the most?
Easily *Fame*. It's my absolute favourite movie in the world. It's so special, so beautiful. I could watch it every day.

If you weren't an actor, what would your dream job be?
I wanted to be a ballet dancer and started dancing when I was quite young. Then in my teens I realised that if I wasn't already in a professional company at that point, then I was probably never going to be. So I went into modelling and made the transition into acting.

Do you have an irrational fear?
I got slightly nauseous now just at the thought of whales. Everyone's like, "Whales are so peaceful, they're so beautiful!" but those prehistoric freaks are so big that even if it's being gentle and calm, if there is a flick of the tail, you're done. I get so uncomfortable even talking about it. Patrick Martins, who [co-stars] in *Small Town, Big Story*, and I send each other videos of them to freak each other out because I need someone else to have the same uncomfortable feeling that I'm having looking at these monsters. Basically dinosaurs are swimming around and everyone's acting like, "It's perfectly normal." It's not our territory, we're not supposed to be down there!

How much is a pint of milk?
I would say it's probably around $3 in the US. Maybe it's a little bit less in the UK, around £1? That's your base, and it gets more expensive from there.

Whose poster did you have on your wall as a kid?
I was an early decorator and I had those ballet calendars and would tear out the pages and hang them in the corridor. And I said it was my art gallery but it was just mostly different pictures of ballet shoes. There was a lot of dance on my walls and on my doors. Oh, and Bon Jovi and The Sisters Of Mercy too.

Tom Cruise or Tom Hanks?
Tom Hanks. He's America's sweetheart and I think America needs that more at the moment. We need so many Tom Hankses! I remember the day we were on the set of *Good Girls* when Covid was starting and we didn't know anyone who had it and all of a sudden it was like, "Tom and Rita [Wilson] have it! No, not Tom and Rita!" It was devastating and they were okay thankfully, but that moment was very scary.

What's the best advice that you've ever been given?
I learned early on that on set it's not other people's job to take care of me. Everyone has a job and their days are long and gruelling. So the best advice that I was told was that at the end of the day, you hang up your costume, you clean up your trailer, you act respectfully and you act like a professional every single day. And sometimes you're faking it 'til you make it, but we just have to take all the information that we've learned along the way and try to be our best version of ourselves at work.

If you could time-travel, when and where would you go?
I'd want to go way, way back to Ancient Egypt. But I also assume I'm just visiting for a weekend, right? Like, I'm not living there as that's a whole different question. I just want to hang out from Friday to Monday, maybe see a little pyramid, maybe check out some carvings.

What's still on your bucket list?
I've never been to Africa or India and those are really high on my list because I think they would be life-changing trips. Patrick, who I share whale things with, went to Tanzania when we wrapped *Small Town, Big Story* and he said it was extraordinary.

Who would play you in a movie?
A young Ann-Margret. She's got the vulnerability and then also a sort of cheekiness and sense of fun that I would like someone to bring out in my character. It would be a wild and sexy romp and a little bit rock 'n' roll.

What do you want written on your tombstone?
"Christina lived with an open heart."

***SMALL TOWN, BIG STORY* IS ON SKY AND NOW FROM 27 FEBRUARY**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

13 FEBRUARY - 12 MARCH 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Shell-raiser: a stop-motion saga like no other.

Top to bottom: Twins Grace (Sarah Snook) and Gilbert Pudel (Kodi Smit-McPhee) head out with Dad; Grace comforts close friend Pinky (Jacki Weaver); Happier times with Pinky.

WATCH FIRST

Director Adam Elliot has said that the film's opening scene was heavily inspired by Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Delicatessen*. "He hasn't seen the film yet," Elliot said of Jeunet in an interview, "but I've told him that I'm ripping him off!"

FILM

MEMOIR OF A SNAIL

DON'T POUR SALT ON THIS STOP-MOTION TRAGICOMEDY

★★★★

OUT **14 FEBRUARY** / CERT **15** / **95 MINS**

DIRECTOR Adam Elliot
CAST Sarah Snook, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Jacki Weaver, Dominique Pinon, Adam Elliot, Eric Bana, Nick Cave

PLOT A lonely Australian woman, Grace (Snook), recounts the events of her tumultuous life to her pet snail.

ALCOHOLISM. FETISHISISM. DEATH. Aardman this certainly ain't, but Adam Elliot's film-festival-storming stop-motion animation proves more than capable of summoning big emotions through its clay creations. The characters of *Memoir Of A Snail* are more scuffed and visibly weighed down by the world, but the earnestness and vulnerability they carry throughout this sombre and occasionally darkly funny saga implores you to stick with them through the pain of it all.

Grace (Sarah Snook) — a collector of snails and owner of a cosy snail hat — is both the protagonist and narrator of the film, which, in biopic fashion, begins at the graveside of a beloved friend, before leaping right back to her birth in the '70s. It's an adroit vocal performance from Snook, who plays Grace with empathy that never crosses into over-sentimentality throughout a life marred by loss and loneliness. Grace's mother dies while delivering her and her twin brother Gilbert (Kodi Smit-McPhee). While living in their family home in Melbourne, their loving father — an aspiring entertainer and alcoholic — dies while they're still children. As orphans the twins can't be housed together, which leads to more heartbreak when Grace is sent to live with neglectful swingers while Gilbert is thrown in with a cruel evangelical family.

From here, the film becomes about Grace's fight to get back to her beloved brother while discovering who she is as an adult. Over the years that follow she develops a hoarding habit, gathers a vast cohort of guinea pigs, finds first love in a problematic neighbour, and makes a firm friend in Pinky (Jacki Weaver), a kooky pensioner with a wild and storied life behind her.

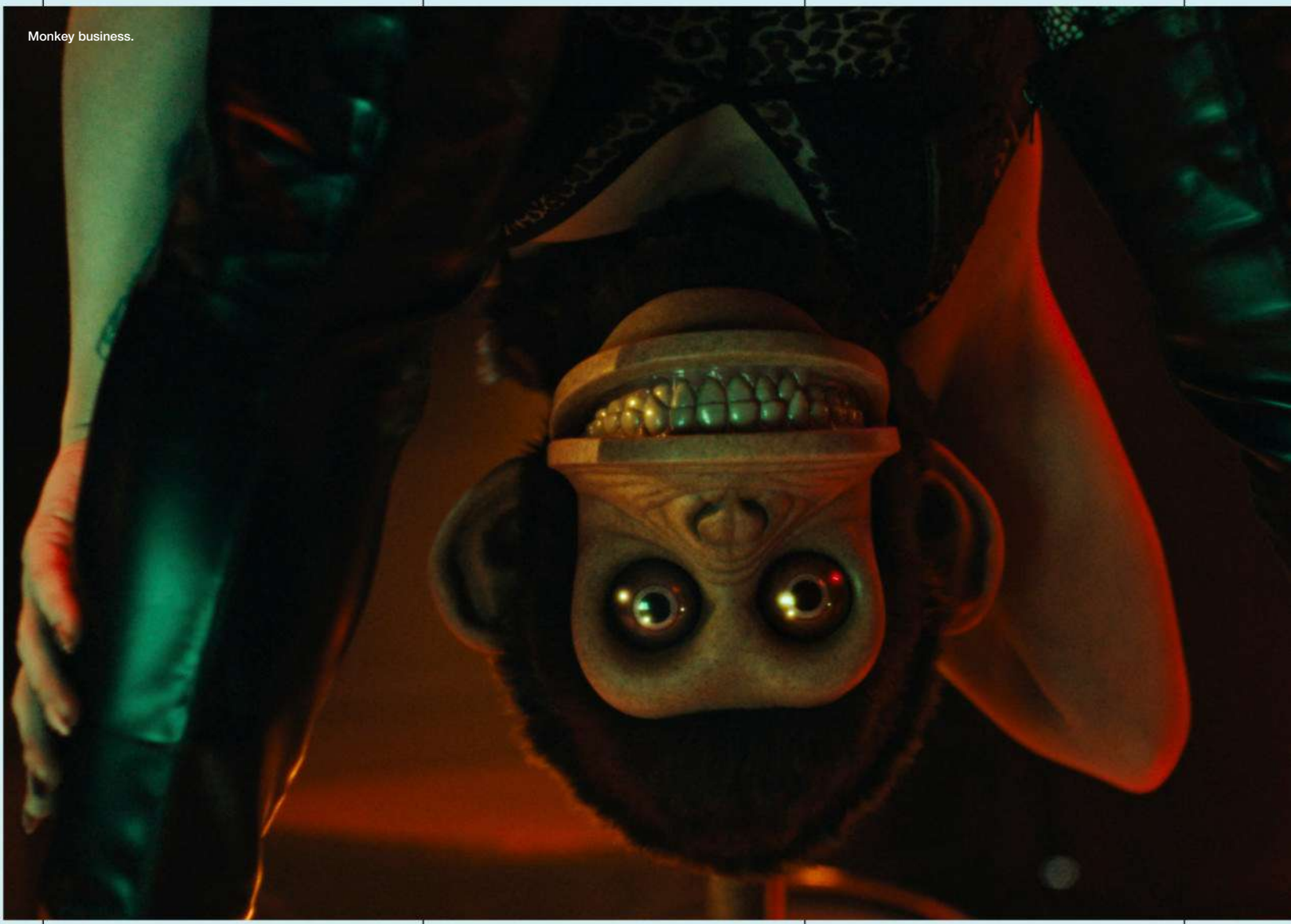
In fact, all the characters are wonderfully developed with their own tics and traits: while Pinky worked as a giant promotional pineapple in a supermarket and played ping-pong with Fidel Castro in her earlier years, bully-bashing Gilbert develops pyromaniac tendencies in his new foster home while coming to terms with his sexuality, and Grace's boyfriend has a talent for mending broken pottery. These details peppered throughout the story never overcrowd the script, meaning that Elliot can dive deeper into knottier themes of childhood trauma and its lasting impact on self-worth, provide space for Grace to maintain a sense of hope, and work in a few stolen gags. It's a rich, deeply moving narrative, albeit one told to a snail named after Sylvia Plath, with the filmmaker's writing on a par with the skill and care behind *Memoir Of A Snail*'s craftsmanship.

Elliot also serves as production designer on the film, and populates his hero's world with thousands of wonky, hand-crafted treasures to conjure magic out of the brown and sludgy shades of the film (Grace's ample snail collection is at the heart of the film's more enchanting scenes). Then there are the visuals of the characters themselves, oddly designed to endearing and distinct effect. The eyes are large, egg-shaped, wrinkly, and capable of producing huge, globby tears. The hair comes in wiry shocks. The mouths are thin yet expressive. Grace's face has a scar on her upper lip from a childhood cleft palate. That there isn't a CG moment in the film makes it an all-too-rare gem, with the glossless, analogue animated style more mesmerising than stilted.

It's been 16 years since Elliot's last feature, the sepia-tinged pen-pal comedy-drama *Mary And Max*, was released, and while *Memoir Of A Snail* adopts the same style of animation and wrestles with similarly dour material (that earlier film saw Philip Seymour Hoffman voice a socially inept man who is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome), it also illustrates a clear love for his characters and a desire to celebrate their differences and eventually turn them into their strengths. It's this affection that reinforces the charm of the film and brings power to Grace's uncompromisingly dark story. Haunting, eccentric yet full of heart, this is an animation that thrives on imperfection and stands triumphantly apart from its stop-motion peers.

BETH WEBB

VERDICT Weird and wonky in the best way, this is a compelling character study that makes its joys, however fleeting, feel truly earned.



Monkey business.

FILM

THE MONKEY

THE ULTIMATE IN SIMIAN TERROR

★★★

OUT **21 FEBRUARY** / CERT **TBC** / **100 MINS**

DIRECTOR Osgood Perkins
CAST Theo James, Christian Convery, Tatiana Maslany, Sarah Levy, Colin O'Brien, Elijah Wood

PLOT As a child, Hal (Convery) was terrorised by a toy monkey that acted as a harbinger of death. Now Hal (James) is in his thirties. And the monkey is back.

IN THE '70S and early '80s, perhaps the only thing that Stephen King liked more than a child with a psychic gift/curse (*Carrie*, *The Shining*, *Firestarter*) was an inanimate object that becomes possessed by evil. A car, HGVs and even a laundry press lurched into life to wreak destruction, and all of these mechanical menaces made their inexorable way from page to screen, directed by John Carpenter (*Christine*), King himself (*Maximum Overdrive*, based on short story 'Trucks') and Tobe Hooper (*The Mangler*).

The Monkey, first published by *Gallery* magazine in 1980 and revised to feature in King's 1985 collection of short stories *Skeleton Crew*, located genuine revulsion and terror in a wind-up toy. Eyes shining with "idiot glee" and lips pulled back in a "carnivorous" grin, the hirsute curio shuddered to life to clap its cymbals... and Death danced. The monkey was, in short, evil incarnate.

So who better to adapt the chilling tale than Osgood Perkins, whose 2024 breakout hit *Longlegs*, like King's *The Monkey*, is drenched in dread? *Longlegs* featured occult dolls and investigated pure evil; the monkey, in this film, is described as "basically the Devil". And if Perkins can wring soul-shuddering scares out of Nicolas Cage playing a demonic serial killer who's as much Botoxed grandma as Mansons Charles and Marilyn, then making a wind-up plaything scary should be child's play.

Only, Perkins has lobbed an intriguing curveball by turning *The Monkey* into a horror-comedy, the writer-director corralling a bunch of larger-than-life supporting players — including, in one scene, Elijah Wood — who might have wandered in from a Coens movie. But that's just garnish. The main sustenance is course after course of ketchup-covered set-pieces that recall Peter Jackson's *Braindead* or the last act of Lee Cronin's *Evil Dead Rise* in their gleeful nastiness, and the *Final Destination* movies in their *Mousetrap*-style, chain-of-calamity inventiveness. Shotgun, harpoon, hibachi knife, bowling ball, electrified swimming pool, lawnmower... all dish the splatstick. Ever wondered what it looks like when a stampede of wild horses gallops over a snoozing camper? "Cherry pie in a sleeping bag," is how one bemused onlooker puts it.

Though Perkins has shifted the tone of the story and replaced those clashing cymbals with a snare drum for our Satanic simian to bang on, he's maintained the core of the tale. Opening in 1999, Hal and his twin brother Bill (both played by Christian Convery) discover the monkey among the many knick-knacks their travelling father has collected over the years. It pounds its drum to the jingle-jangle of 'I Do Like To Be Beside

KEEP 'EM PEELED

Look out for the boys' babysitter (played by Danice Dreyer). Her character is named Annie Wilkes — a nod to another famous King story, *Misery*.

Top to bottom: Preach: the Pastor (Nicco Del Rio) in full flow; A sticky situation for Hal (Theo James); Tatiana Maslany could do with some Optrex.

The Seaside' and the boys' babysitter is decapitated in a freak accident. More drums, more splats. The boys try to be rid of the toy but, as King fans know, sometimes they come back. Cut to present day and Hal (Theo James) has seen neither his brother nor the monkey for many years. But all that is about to change.

There's a hint of *It* to the structure of characters fighting an evil entity as both children and adults, while the story riffs on W.W. Jacobs' famous 1902 tale *The Monkey's Paw*, in which wishes come at an enormous price — here, young Hal experiments with winding up the monkey with a particular person in mind, only to learn, in the most terrible way, it doesn't take requests. But the biggest influences on Perkins' movie are surely the grisly EC Comics stories that King devoured as a kid, and paid homage to when penning *Creepshow* for pal George A. Romero. Is *The Monkey* as memorable as vignettes like *The Crate*, *They're Creeping Up On You* and *Creepshow 2*'s 'The Raft' (this last also based on a story in *Skeleton Crew*)? Perhaps not: the material is as stretched as the skin of that cursed snare drum, and Perkins opts to maintain the sombre palette and pristinely controlled framing that so distinguished *Longlegs*, when a looser style might have better served the crazed antics.

But it sure makes for a fun night at the movies. As Hal tells his young son Petey (Colin O'Brien), "Everybody dies, that's life." And sometimes the only way to deal with death is to laugh at it. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

VERDICT Don't expect the true terror of Perkins' *Longlegs* or King's source story. Do expect plentiful gags to make you, well, gag. The best scenes here are a gory glory.

The Emperor's new clothes: Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh) glams up. **Below:** Zeph (Rob Kazinsky) and Alok (Omari Hardwick).

FILM

STAR TREK: SECTION 31

MICHELLE YEOH'S FINAL FRONTIER

★★

OUT **NOW (PARAMOUNT+)** / CERT **12** / **95 MINS**

DIRECTOR Olatunde Osunsanmi
CAST Michelle Yeoh, Omari Hardwick, Sam Richardson, Sven Ruygrok

PLOT Philippa Georgiou (Yeoh), former Emperor of the Mirror Universe (stay with us), is recruited to track down a stolen super-weapon.

WE'VE WAITED NINE long years for a follow-up to Justin Lin's *Star Trek Beyond*. S.J. Clarkson's sequel faltered and failed. Noah Hawley's reboot never got out of space dock. Even Tarantino's unexpected foray got sucked into a pre-production black hole. Instead, we are presented with the first of Paramount's *Trek* TV movies: this long-gestating spin-off from *Star Trek: Discovery*.

Smartly seizing upon that show's most interesting character — the sociopathic former Emperor of *Star Trek*'s Mirror Universe (Michelle Yeoh) — *Section 31* weaves a surprisingly accessible (for *Star Trek*) story that's part heist, part space-espionage romp, drawing heavily on both *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Mission: Impossible*. With Yeoh's Georgiou now the unlikely proprietor of a space night club — having stepped through a time portal from the (even further) future in *Discovery* Season 3 (don't ask) — she once again throws her lot in with Starfleet's Section 31 after news arises that a stolen MacGuffin is to be trafficked through her establishment.

Undertaking this operation-cum-heist is a ragtag band of agents — Starfleet's Seven, if you will — including a cyborg, a shape-shifter, a psychic seductress, and a nano-sized lifeform with an inexplicable (and borderline criminal) cod Irish accent. Skirting the fact that such a flamboyant band would be wholly unsuited for covert action, the initial set-up does have potential. Leaning unusually hard into comedy, the script doles out barbs and banter at a rapid clip ("So you're into mecha boom-boom? Lots of humans are, no shame"; "Don't get your prime directives in a bunch"), and a surprisingly bleak flashback prologue prefaces the whole affair with a kind of intergalactic Hunger Games.

However, after the heist itself, the story stalls. The team, while undeniably colourful, lack the heart of *Guardians*' motley crew, and with each of them defined primarily by snark, there's little to differentiate them beyond the superficial. Yeoh does her best with what's available, but with such a crowded call sheet, Georgiou all too often gets lost in the mix. Worse, hard-hitting prologue aside, her character feels horribly sanitised, villainous edges sanded off, giving way to an unforgivable blandness that soundly defangs one of the franchise's most consistently compelling anti-heroes.

Directed by *Discovery* veteran Olatunde Osunsanmi and penned by former *Discovery* producer Craig Sweeny, the results are disappointing — if not entirely surprising. *Section 31* began life as a series in its own right before scheduling and a pandemic got in the way. Re-tooled as a movie from episode scripts, it ends up feeling neither one nor the other: a bland comedy spacecapade stuck between two (strange new) worlds. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT Less a *Star Trek* movie than a middling pilot episode setting up a series that will never come, this makes for a disheartening send-off for a once great character.

Show-stopper: Pamela Anderson as Shelly. **Below:** Away from the spotlight.

FILM

THE LAST SHOWGIRL

PAMELA ANDERSON MAKES A SPARKLING COMEBACK

★★★

OUT **28 FEBRUARY** / CERT **15** / **88 MINS**

DIRECTOR Gia Coppola
CAST Pamela Anderson, Jamie Lee Curtis, Dave Bautista, Brenda Song, Kiernan Shipka, Billie Lourd, Jason Schwartzman

PLOT Las Vegas showgirl Shelly (Anderson) questions the cost of choosing a life on stage as her final curtain call beckons.

FEW CELEBRITIES HAVE been as denigrated throughout their career as Pamela Anderson — and so a sober, wistful character study would seem the perfect vehicle for her to prove her acting chops. The former *Baywatch* star gives a quite literally glittering comeback performance in Gia Coppola's latest, *The Last Showgirl*, a dreamy, understated ode to the underdogs of Las Vegas. After *Mainstream* and *Palo Alto*, Coppola jettisons her usual wryly humorous tone in favour of a more pensive mood. But the drama falls slightly short of being the heavy hitter it hopes to be.

Bedecked in feathers and rhinestones, Anderson embodies a livewire energy as Shelly, a Las Vegas Strip dancer who we first see lying about her age in an audition. Cut to roughly a week before, and Shelly is informed by her sweet-natured producer Eddie (Dave Bautista) that Le Razzle Dazzle, the show Shelly has been the face of for 38 years, has finally hit its last leg. Together with her troupe of much greener showgirls (including Kiernan Shipka and Brenda Song), Shelly will soon be out of a job, wondering if she will have to transition to a casino cocktail waitress like her longtime pal Annette (a white-lipstick-wearing Jamie Lee Curtis). While weighing up what to do, she leaves a frenzied voicemail which summons her daughter (Billie Lourd) back into her life.

And so begins Shelly's existential crisis. Shot with fuzzy film stock and awash with shimmering costumes and lights, the reverie-like quality of *The Last Showgirl* makes it a notably muted addition to the Las Vegas cinematic canon — several notches down from the likes of *Ocean's Eleven*, *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* or its notorious predecessor, *Showgirls*. But Shelly is starting to wake up from this dream to the cruel reality of life in Sin City. Unable to land a job at the age of 57 (Jason Schwartzman briefly cameos as a straight-talking audition director to hit this point home) but having also sacrificed a meaningful bond with her daughter for her career, in rapid succession Shelly is punished for her life choices; mostly for being a woman.

There is much to admire in Coppola's meditation on motherhood, ageing and Las Vegas' hidden underbelly, though the script could have used some fine-tuning. Borrowing heavily from the likes of Sean Baker and even John Cassavetes, the film's flimsy character development and clunky dialogue sometimes leave the valiant performances of Anderson, Shipka and Bautista feeling strangely adrift. And yet, even if the result is a little half-hearted, this is a hell of an impressive showcase for Anderson. If there's any justice, it surely marks the start of her fully fledged return to the spotlight. **MIRIAM BALANESCU**

VERDICT Not quite a showstopper, but this reflection on womanhood boasts noteworthy performances across the board, especially from Pamela Anderson and a surprisingly tender Dave Bautista.

FILM

BANK OF DAVE 2: THE LOAN RANGER

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **12** / **104 MINS**
DIRECTOR Chris Foggin
CAST Rory Kinnear, Jo Hartley, Chrissy Metz, Rob Delaney

You don't often hear the words "feel-good" and "Financial Conduct Authority" in the same sentence. But 2023's *Bank Of Dave* was as feel-good as they come, telling the "true-ish" story of David Fishwick (Rory Kinnear), a Burnley businessman who opened a community bank. Now he's back, turning his attention to predatory payday lenders. This is not nuanced filmmaking, hammering its message home with the subtlety of a Lancashire hotpot to the face. But it's still a powerful force of feel-goodery, largely due to Rory Kinnear's charismatic performance. It's not especially cinematic — and again, rather bafflingly ends with a Def Leppard gig — but it's all to make you feel good, with a salient, real-life Robin Hood point to make. **JN**

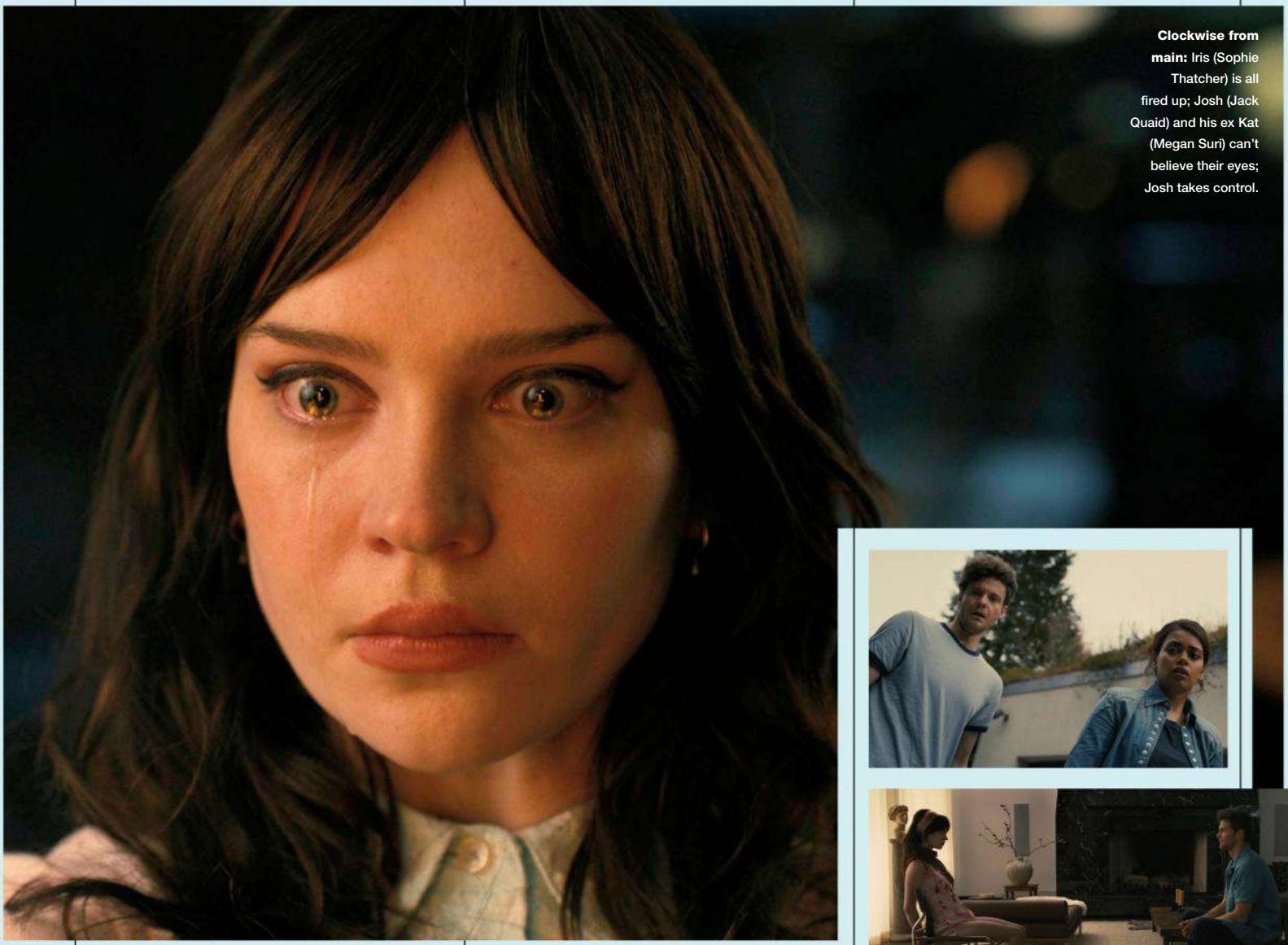
FILM

WILLIAM TELL

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **133 MINS**
DIRECTOR Nick Hamm
CAST Claes Bang, Rafe Spall, Golshifteh Farahani, Ben Kingsley

William Tell's status as a folk hero makes his story kind of a *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves* for the Swiss, only they're taking a country from the rich (Austria) and giving it to the poor. This new take is roughly as historically accurate as that Kevin Costner film too — but if you can get past how old-fashioned it feels and lean into the *Braveheart*-esque fight for freedom, it's rather fun. Tell (Dane Claes Bang) has a strong anti-authoritarian streak that makes him quick to stand up for the needy, and Bang is good: unshowy and serious, shaven-headed instead of sporting a Costner mullet. The script isn't quite as assured, and it loses points for a sequel-baiting ending, but it benefits from solid performances and spectacular vistas. **HOH**



Clockwise from main: Iris (Sophie Thatcher) is all fired up; Josh (Jack Quaid) and his ex Kat (Megan Suri) can't believe their eyes; Josh takes control.

FILM

COMPANION

HEY SIRI, MAKE ME A NEW AI HORROR-THRILLER

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **97 MINS**

DIRECTOR Drew Hancock
CAST Sophie Thatcher, Jack Quaid, Lukas Gage, Megan Suri, Harvey Guillén, Rupert Friend

PLOT Robot companion Iris (Thatcher) is whisked away by boyfriend Josh (Quaid) for a weekend that descends into bloody chaos.

FROM THE GENRE-DEFINING image of Maria and her chrome curves in 1927's *Metropolis*, to Jude Law's Gigolo Joe in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, and Ana de Armas' sultry Joi in *Blade Runner 2049*, hot robots have never been out of style. But with the rise of AI chatbots ready to profess their love, the futurism of Spike Jonze's *Her* seems closer than ever before. The next logical step is *Companion*, in which even your android partner's intelligence level can be customised by an app on your phone. God help us.

Companion, produced by the team behind *Barbarian*, opens with a prologue that's a neat homage to a fembot classic, 1975's *The Stepford Wives*, and its famous supermarket sequence. Iris (*Heretic*'s Sophie Thatcher), incongruously styled throughout as a mid-century doll with a miniature beehive hairdo, walks dreamily down an aisle pushing a shopping trolley. She locks eyes with Josh (a nicely smarmy Jack Quaid), who charmingly upsets a display of oranges. It's the cutest of meet cutes, and in voiceover Iris describes the blissful experience of finding meaning in her life the day she met him, surpassed only by the day she killed him.

For those annoyed at the poster and trailer revealing Iris' bionic biology, cool your jets. The film doesn't exactly keep it a secret, with the script throwing in observations about Iris being "built that way" and a "beautiful creation" from the beginning. She certainly feels like an outsider in the luxurious lakeside lodge where she and Josh have been invited by his friends for the weekend. It's owned by seedy Russian sugar daddy Sergey, played by an enjoyably daft Rupert Friend with a perma-tan and mullet.

Where *Companion* really gets going is in its more sprightly and surprising second half. Pivoting away from the obvious reveal of Iris' origins, the film becomes a noir-ish chase through the woods with $12 million cash at stake while Iris makes a bid for freedom from her captor. There's some humour along the way, mostly via *What We Do In The Shadows*' Harvey Guillén as Josh's friend Eli, partnered with an endearing Lukas Gage as his himbo boyfriend.

Although at the outset it seems like writer/director Drew Hancock is aiming for his own entry in the recent wave of 'patriarchy is evil' dark comedies with a sci-fi bent, like *Don't Worry Darling* or *Blink Twice*, it's an odd relief that *Companion* isn't really about anything more serious than realising your boyfriend is a controlling arsehole.

LAURA VENNING

VERDICT **Entertaining if inconsequential, *Companion* is buoyed by solid central performances from actors that seem keenly aware that it's all just a bit of bloody fun. *Viva la robot revolución*!**

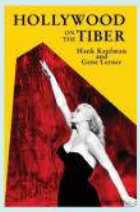
BOOKS

HOLLYWOOD ON THE TIBER

UPSIDE, INSIDE OUT, LIVIN' LA DOLCE VITA

★★★

AUTHORS **HANK KAUFMAN, GENE LERNER**



PRIEST. PSYCHIATRIST. Pimp. This is the job description of a film agent as perceived by Hank Kaufman and Gene Lerner, two Americans who re-located to Rome in 1953 and took full advantage of the explosion of American film production in Italy during the '50s and '60s. Written by Kaufman and Lerner in the late '70s (they've both since passed), published in Italy in 1982 and only now translated into English, *Hollywood On The Tiber* (Italy's third-longest river, fact fans) is shot through with hyperbole and you'll get repetitive strain injury picking up all the names dropped, but it's an enjoyable *lettera d'amore* to the glitz and glam of '60s Rome; a kind of *Call My Agent* hopped up on espresso.

As the pair set up their business — initially a talent agency and PR outfit — the early chapters are full of engaging interactions with stars: a futile, miserable lunch with Hedy Lamarr that ended with an argument over the bill ("the folded monster"); co-ordinating Mel Ferrer and Audrey Hepburn's secret wedding; Marlon Brando protecting Kaufman's broken arm in the throng at the Italian *On The Waterfront* premiere, only to walk straight out when he realised the film was dubbed ("I am an actor, not a dummy").

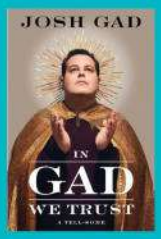
Later chapters do deeper dives into singular stars: Latin love god Rossano Brazzi; neo-realism icon Anna Magnani (who calls Ingrid Bergman "a Swedish trollop"); Fellini firebrand Anita Ekberg; and Ava Gardner, who came into Kaufman and Lerner's orbit after her marriage to Frank Sinatra ended — there is a terrifying account of a fight with her lover George C. Scott, who tried to strangle Gardner with a towel in the Savoy, a brutal snapshot of an abusive relationship.

Some of the anecdotes start strong — a run-in with producer Dino De Laurentiis — but fizzle out to blah resolutions. Still, there's lots of juicy gossip — Sophia Loren once kicked an Italian leading man in the nuts; Gardner once ran over some chickens — and titbits on the high-end nightlife, including one cocktail party involving "call girls, three dogs, one gibbon and a cockatoo". If nothing else, with its evocations of the food, fashion, architecture and culture, *Hollywood On The Tiber* inspires a deep desire to time-travel to 1960s Rome.

Some of the attitudes are of their time (there is a big focus on big breasts), occasionally the prose is more purple than Thanos and it lacks a compelling through-line. But Lerner and Kaufman make erudite, witty, likeable guides for a zippy ride through Sodom and Gomorrah on a Vespa. Basically it's an HBO show waiting to happen. **IAN FREER**

Anita Ekberg makes a splash in *La Dolce Vita*.

VERDICT **The writing is starry-eyed and it doesn't entirely hang together as a story, but *Hollywood On The Tiber* is an entertaining vacation in an intoxicating world.**



IN GAD WE TRUST

★★★

AUTHOR **JOSH GAD**

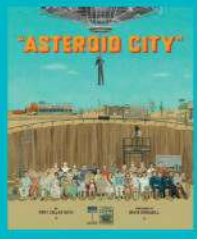
This debut from *Frozen* star Josh Gad has been presented as a "collection of essays", but in reality it's a fairly linear memoir, tracking his journey from a childhood in Hollywood, Florida — the son of an emerald-dealer Afghan-Jewish father and a German-American Holocaust-survivor mother — all the way to Hollywood, California. While some anecdotes will be for Gad-flies only, he maintains a nice, self-deprecating charm. **JN**

THE ART AND MAKING OF ARCANE

★★★★

AUTHOR **ELISABETH VINCENTELLI**

This exhaustive, neon-jacketed book lays bare the evolution of Netflix's stunning animated series from concept to execution. Awash with concept art, storyboards and blueprints from the archives of French animation studio Fortiche, with insight from the showrunners, animators and artists, it covers everything from the class-war concept and punk aesthetic to the vital role of music in its realisation. **JD**



ASTEROID CITY

★★★★

AUTHOR **MATT ZOLLER SEITZ**

The sixth edition of Matt Zoller Seitz's Wes Anderson Collection series brings the usual level of deep access, meticulous layouts and handsome behind-the-scenes artwork. Notable highlights include a lively chat with the 'Junior Stargazers' from the film and a posthumous introduction by the late film scholar David Bordwell. A pleasingly deep dive into the director's meta 2023 sci-fi, it's a worthy addition to any coffee table. **JN**

Imago

Clockwise from main: Lumonaries Helly R. (Britt Lower) and Mark S. (Adam Scott); It had been one hell of an office party; Space-invasion.

TV

SEVERANCE: SEASON 2

INNIE, OUTIE, SHAKE IT ALL ABOUT-IE

★★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNER Dan Erickson
CAST Adam Scott, Britt Lower, Zach Cherry, John Turturro, Christopher Walken

PLOT Having unlocked some secrets of their 'outie' life, four 'severed' employees of Lumon Industries learn the consequences of their actions.

IT HAS, AS the creepily perma-smiling Lumon manager Milchick (Tramell Tillman) puts it, "been a minute". Three long years have elapsed since the first season of *Severance* — the sci-fi-ish drama about an extreme form of work-life balance — became a sleeper hit for Apple TV+.

If you're feeling as forgetful as a microchipped 'innie' on what exactly happened during those first ten episodes, you would be forgiven. Thankfully, this much-delayed Season 2 begins with a three-minute recap to catch us up: reminding us how the four 'severed' office drones, Mark S. (Adam Scott), Irving B. (John Turturro), Dylan B. (Zach Cherry), and Helly R. (Britt Lower), staged a quiet rebellion in their secretive office workplace — leading to a truly astonishing season finale, in which the two worlds finally blurred.

We pick up in the immediate aftermath of what has now been termed the 'Macrodata Uprising'. Episode 1 does not mess about: Ben Stiller, back in the director's chair for five of these ten episodes, has his camera barrel-rolling through Lumen's corridors, some Sam Raimi-esque visual acrobatics bringing us right back. It is again one of the more stylish and thoughtfully directed shows currently on television: the innie world an endless gleaming corporate purgatory, the outie world dark and foreboding.

There is a marvellous juggling of tones, too, from head writer and showrunner Dan Erickson: it is by turns gripping, tense, bewildering and darkly, absurdly funny. ("Why are you a child?" Bob Balaban's Mark W. asks of Sarah Bock's confusingly teenage new deputy manager, Miss Huang. "Because of when I was born," is the best she can manage.) Erickson also slowly expands his worldbuilding, further establishing the personality cult of Lumon founder Kier Eagan with mantras like, "Let Kier guide your hand."

KILLER QUOTE

"Just wondering how common it is for your managers to commit fucking lactation fraud against their employees' families?"
DEVON (JEN TULLOCK)

But most pressingly, after that almighty years-long cliffhanger, does it offer any answers? Yes — but those answers only lead to more questions. Erickson and Stiller will satisfy some of your queries, but they sustain the mystery by skilfully asking new ones: What are they doing with the 'macrodata'? What is motivating Helly's outie? What, exactly, is up with that goat farm? And what does it mean for the duality of a soul when a single mind is split? "We're the same-ish person," observes innie Mark S. of his outie. "It's... mushy."

That need to sustain a puzzle-box mystery may feel frustrating at times: significant plot-shifts from one episode lead only to handbrake-turns into another. Patience, again, is required. But you are in the hands of strong, confident, ambitious storytellers here. The wait was worth it. Praise Kier! **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **After a storming Season 1, Season 2 expands and deepens the original mysteries while opening up new ones. Sharply made and deftly executed, the employee benefits are there if you stay with it.**

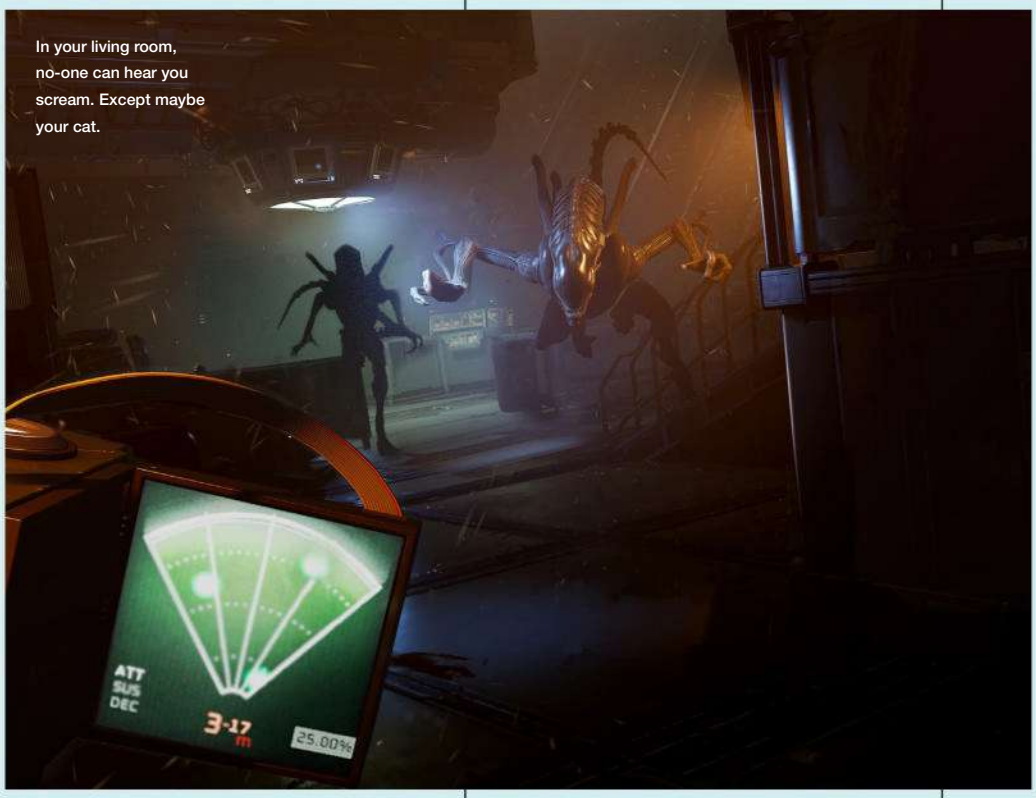
GAMES

ALIEN: ROGUE INCURSION

THIS TIME IT'S VR

★★★★

META QUEST, PC, PS VR2



In your living room, no-one can hear you scream. Except maybe your cat.

THERE IS A reason why, for ten years after its release, *Alien: Isolation* remained one of the most pulse-pounding virtual-reality experiences available: the opportunity to come face-to-facehugger with H.R. Giger's xenomorphs felt like the entire reason VR was invented. Now, a decade on, *Alien: Rogue Incursion* has entered the chat, drawing its inspiration less from Ridley Scott's original *Alien* than James Cameron's firepower-packing successor.

Placing you behind the eyes of former Colonial Marine Zula Hendricks (a fan-favourite character from *Alien* comic titles), the game sets down (violently) outside the colony of Castor's Cradle, on the storm-swept planet of Purdan. As you scout the settlement's gloomy, acid-scarred corridors — white-knuckle grip on your pulse rifle, the motion tracker's tap-tap in your ears — the feeling of having stepped directly into a scene from *Aliens* is almost overwhelming. You can almost hear Bill Paxton's grousing with every step.

VR developer Survios (*Creed: Rise To Glory*) replicates the aesthetic of the 1986 film down to the last bulkhead rivet, including everything from the colony's industrial decor and green-hued '80s monitors, to the distinctive crackle of pulse rifle fire. Any loud noise draws attention of the fanged and clawed variety and, when they come, close encounters with the xenomorphs themselves are as horrifyingly realistic as you might imagine. The first time an alien comes hissing out of a vent directly above you, it's all you can do not to fire wildly in every direction while screaming, Hudson-like, in pure, terror-driven panic.

Rifle, sidearm and shotgun ensure Zula isn't helpless when the dinner bell rings, of course, but ammo is far from plentiful and the difficulty of fumbling through a reload while under pressure, combined with the scarcity of save terminals, mean you're rarely given licence to feel at ease. And while the range of enemies is limited and alien AI is somewhat inconsistent (for every wall-hopping bug dead-set on your disembowelment, another will resort to hard stares as it dumbly waits to be shot in the face), the game's eight-hour campaign is economical enough to keep the experience from getting tired.

Written by veteran *Alien* tie-in novelist Alex White, the story doesn't quite have the punch of Cameron's propulsive screenplay, but it does make good use of both character (Zula and android companion Davis 01 make for engaging company) and setting, building towards a suitably thrilling climax that paves the way for the game's currently in-development second act. But even without this narrative hook, *Rogue Incursion* could very well get by on vibes alone. Oozing authenticity from every biomechanical pore, the game offers the opportunity to bodily immerse yourself in the world of the *Alien* films — as long as your nerves can handle it. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT **Terrifying, exhilarating and hugely atmospheric, *Alien: Rogue Incursion* is an express elevator to hell. Going down!**

THE THING REMASTERED

★★★

NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, PS5, PS4, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

Initially a *PS2*-era sequel to John Carpenter's *The Thing*, this sees soldier Captain Blake investigating the ruined Antarctic base from the film, where something alien still festers. Despite being lovingly remastered by Nightdive Studios, this squad-based shooter still shows its age in places, but with smart staging and allies losing their minds to fear and paranoia, it still packs in the scares. **MK**

MONUMENT VALLEY 3

★★★★

ANDROID/iOS (NETFLIX)

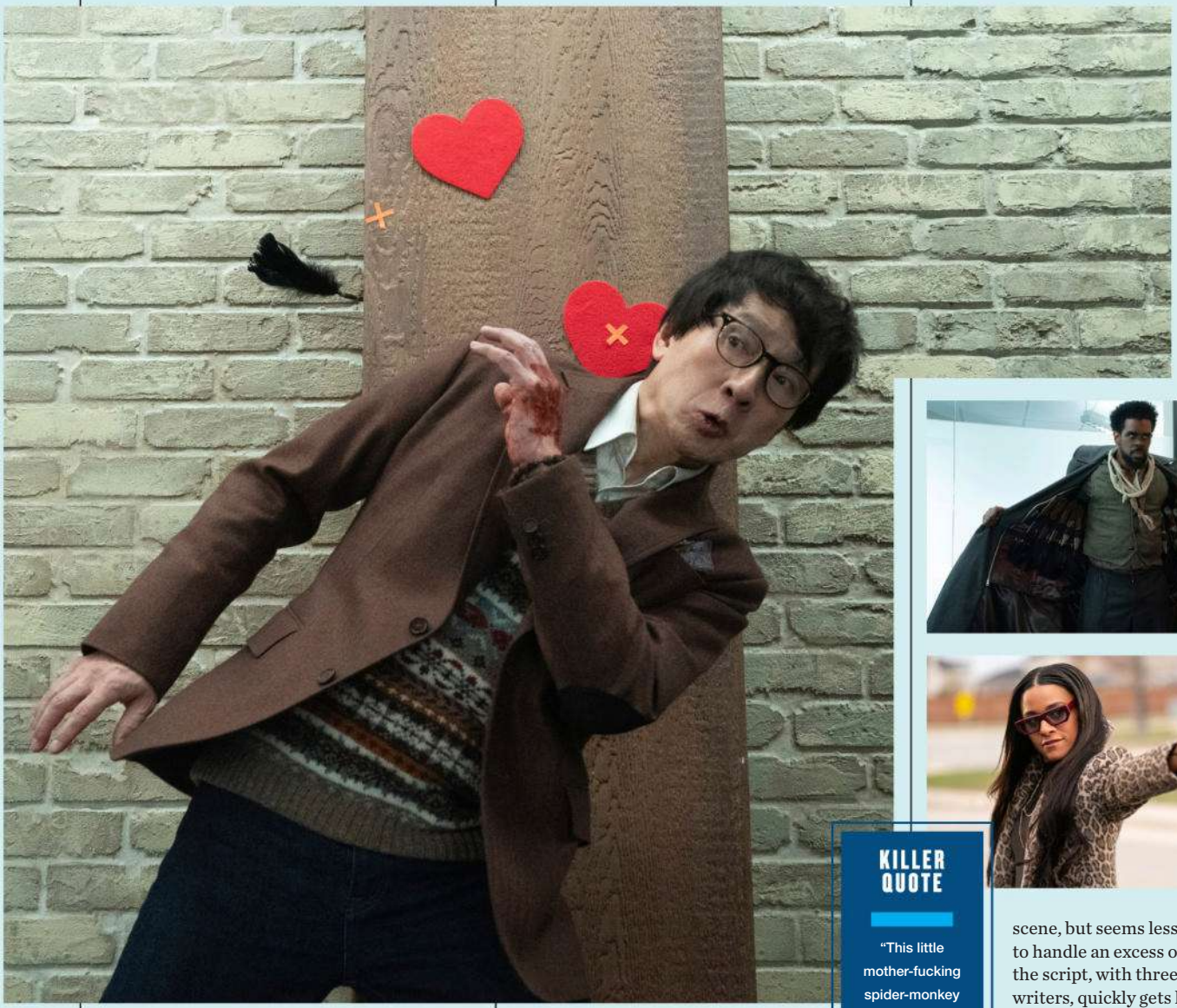
This third entry in the mobile puzzle game series — now exclusively in the Netflix stable — is effectively more of the same. But what beautiful 'same' it is: surreal, splendidly designed, M.C. Escher-inspired perspective-shifting conundrums, set across ten levels (with more to be released), weaving in morsels of emotion through its very light storytelling efforts. It almost plays like a very soothing audiovisual sudoku. A treat. **JN**

ROBODUNK

★★★★

NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

Take two-on-two basketball classic *NBA Jam*, replace the players with customisable battle bots and add rogue-like mechanics to progress though league rankings, and you have *RoboDunk*. Speedy matches with variable rules and support for co-op play make for chaotic fun, while its charming stop-motion visuals and eye for spectacle — dunk from space!— make it stand out. **MK**



Clockwise from main: He's a lover *and* a fighter — Ke Huy Quan as Marvin; Knives out: the Raven (Mustafa Shakir); Trigger happy: Ariana DeBose as Rose.

FILM

LOVE HURTS

AN ACTION COMEDY CAUGHT IN A BAD ROMANCE

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **83 MINS**

DIRECTOR Jonathan Eusebio
CAST Ke Huy Quan, Ariana DeBose, Daniel Wu, Marshawn Lynch, Mustafa Shakir, Lio Tipton, Sean Astin

PLOT Marvin (Quan) lives a quiet life as a successful realtor. But when Rose (DeBose) re-enters his life, he is forced to confront his past life as a hitman.

KE HUY QUAN has had a life story itself worthy of a Hollywood biopic: from Vietnamese refugee to a child blockbuster star to relative obscurity to his triumphant, Oscar-winning 2022 comeback with *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Now once again booked and busy, Quan enjoys leading-man status for the first time in new action-comedy *Love Hurts*. What really hurts, though, is that the film doesn't know how to make the most of him.

Quan plays Marvin Gable (yes, one syllable away from a famous love-song merchant), a real-estate agent who wears a sensible bicycle helmet, waves cheerfully to his neighbours, picks up litter in the park, and says things like "What the fudge?" instead of the ruder option. He loves his job, a true real-estate nerd. But Marvin, it quickly emerges, has a secret life: he is actually a reformed hitman, a former assassin forced to grapple with his violent past, a little like David Cronenberg's *A History Of Violence* or Ilya Naishuller's *Nobody*.

As with *Nobody*, *Love Hurts* comes from 87North, the stunt-focused production company behind *John Wick*, and as you might expect, the action here is reliably slick. The early fight scenes — especially a frantic tussle in a kitchen, by some distance the film's apex — seem to consciously channel Jackie Chan. Quan (a black belt in taekwondo) is breathlessly agile and acrobatic, and he makes it all feel fun and scrappy when availing himself of improvised weaponry while protecting his precious 'Regional Realtor Of The Year' certificate.

First-time director Jonathan Eusebio, a former stuntman, knows his way around a fight scene, but seems less sure how to handle an excess of exposition; the script, with three credited writers, quickly gets lost in the weeds of a needlessly convoluted plot, and despite having all the trappings of a comedy forgets to put in many actual jokes.

Few characters beyond Marvin make any lasting impression, either: Quan's fellow *Goonies* brother-in-arms Sean Astin has a sweet turn, but everyone else seems to have been prefabricated in a Generic Bad Guy factory. Ariana DeBose — like Quan, a fellow Spielberg alum — is described as the "kind of woman a man would remember", yet her femme-fatale-fascimile is disappointingly thinly drawn.

Most unforgivably, the film doesn't fully utilise its greatest asset. As seen in *Everything Everywhere*, Quan has the remarkable versatility to switch between lovable goof and badass action star, between charmingly silly and deeply heartfelt. He gives it his all here (one scene nicely evinces his earnestly emotional side) even as the film around him never quite hangs together. *Love Hurts* doesn't live up to its potential — but it can't stop Ke Huy Quan's unstoppable trajectory. **JOHN NUGENT**

KILLER QUOTE

"This little mother-fucking spider-monkey ninja god!" KING (MARSHAWN LYNCH)

VERDICT **Quan is typically charismatic in a film that underserves his talents: an action-comedy with a solid amount of the former, but not much of the latter.**

Sharp shooters Jamie Foxx and Cameron Diaz.

FILM

BACK IN ACTION

DON'T CALL IT A CAM-BACK

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **12** / **114 MINS**

DIRECTOR Seth Gordon
CAST Jamie Foxx, Cameron Diaz, Glenn Close, Andrew Scott, Jamie Demetriou

PLOT When their cover is blown, two former CIA agents (Foxx, Diaz) ditch their domestic life and go on the run with their children.

YOU HAVE TO imagine that *Back In Action* began with its casting, and worked everything else — that apt title, the corresponding premise — backwards from there. Because those three words apply most directly to the film's A-list star: Cameron Diaz, returning to the screen for the first time in over a decade, on hiatus since 2014's *Annie* remake. Back in action, indeed.

As a comeback vehicle, Seth Gordon's (*Horrible Bosses*) fast and frothy action-comedy isn't exactly a stretch for Diaz — from *Charlie's Angels* to *Knight And Day*, she's long combined outlandish action and affable laughs with ease. None of that ability has been lost in her ten-year absence, making *Back In Action* (no Looney Tunes here, Bugs Bunny stans) something of an easy-going delight — a slight but fizzily watchable spies-turned-parents-turned-spies-again romp.

Having left the CIA after discovering she's pregnant mid mountain-top mission (a high-octane opening set-piece with some ropey CGI), Diaz's Emily settles into domestic life with her field-partner-turned-life-partner Matt (Jamie Foxx, himself somewhat back in action; post-production, he fell seriously ill, and has largely been recovering since). But 15 years later, they blow their cover in a nightclub punch-up that goes viral (YouTube title: 'BOOMERS WRECK DANCE PARTY'), forcing them back into the world of espionage, this time with kids (McKenna Roberts, Rylan Jackson) in tow.

It's a simple but solid premise that Diaz and Foxx attack with gusto, both in the pleasantly crunchy fight scenes — often soundtracked by Rat Pack and soul hits — and in their comedic chemistry. Emily and Matt clearly delight in resurrecting their adrenaline-fuelled life after a decade-plus of domesticity ("I sell custom puzzles on Etsy!" argues Diaz, trying to convince that she couldn't possibly be a spy), fist-bumping mid-mayhem, and deploying petrol pumps, Mentos and Coke as weapons. That energy translates; watching Diaz kick guys in the head, to the sounds of 'Ain't That A Kick In The Head', is a welcome treat for generations raised on *Charlie's Angels*.

Beyond the intelligence antics, *Back In Action* is ultimately a parenting comedy — especially once it hops the Pond to London, where Emily reunites with her estranged mother Ginny (Glenn Close) and Ginny's weirdo toyboy Nigel (Jamie Demetriou, the comedic highlight). There's a smidge of substance in that generational exploration, but never enough to weigh down the fun.

You'll see the third-act 'twist' coming a mile off, and Andrew Scott and Kyle Chandler are wasted in insubstantial roles. But *Back In Action* succeeds in its mission statement. While Diaz and Foxx could do this in their sleep, it's a joy having them out of hibernation. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT **A solid action-comedy that proves just how much we've missed Cameron Diaz in the last ten years. Next time don't leave it so long, eh?**

Desperate times when the Pedigree Chum ran out. **Below:** Fraught times for the family.

FILM

WOLF MAN

AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN AMERICA

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **103 MINS**

DIRECTOR Leigh Whannell
CAST Christopher Abbott, Julia Garner, Matilda Firth

PLOT Blake (Abbot) takes his wife Charlotte (Garner) and daughter Ginger (Firth) back to the rural home where he grew up — but they find something terrifying waiting in the woods.

LEIGH WHANNELL IS back in Universal's world of classic monsters. Following 2020's *The Invisible Man*, the filmmaker returns with *Wolf Man*, a new, modern take on the 1941 Gothic horror. It follows Blake (Christopher Abbott, replacing original star Ryan Gosling), a family man whose marriage to journalist Charlotte (Julia Garner) has hit a rough patch, his career on pause while he takes on the role of stay-at-home dad to their young daughter Ginger (Matilda Firth). After receiving notice that his father has died, Blake and family head to his childhood home, a remote farm in the forests of Oregon, to pack up the deceased patriarch's belongings. Upon arrival, they're attacked by a mysterious creature — and soon, Blake himself begins to transform.

What made Whannell's *The Invisible Man* so effective was the perfect pairing of monster and metaphor — the crazy-making experience of a man who can only be sensed, not seen, stalking his victim of domestic abuse. *Wolf Man*, in this sense, is more of a mish-mash. Blake's metamorphosis represents multiple things — generational trauma, both passing it on and fighting against it; degenerative disease; the breakdown of a relationship. Each are meaty, emotional subjects, and Blake's gradual shift into something that feels a connection to his family but invokes fear in them is evocative. The issue is the film's inconsistency

in how it plays into that — Charlotte's reaction to her husband's increasingly animalistic appearance veers from pity and understanding to all-out screaming in ways that don't always make sense.

It's when *Wolf Man* does lean into the horror that it really sings, though. Whannell builds tension from the off, taking a setting that could be beautiful (the forest) and making it truly terrifying — pitch-black, vast and claustrophobic in equal measure, full of creaks and groans and growls (the sound design is remarkable and chilling). The jump-scares work, and the prosthetics — while at times distracting — are impressive, with plenty of wince-inducing, gnarly moments. Whannell is inventive with the camera, swinging it to mimic Blake's disorientation, and lets the audience see the world through his changing eyes by switching into a kind of 'wolf-vision'. It's brighter, luminescent, and Charlotte and Ginger's faces become distorted, speaking a language Blake no longer understands. It feels fresh and is deployed to great effect.

Abbott commits entirely to all stages of the role, conveying a loving father with darkness lurking within — even before he turns wolfy. Firth is charming, as is the tenderness in Ginger and Blake's relationship. Garner's Charlotte is the piece that feels like it doesn't quite fit, but in a way, that plays into the character's arc. Despite some clunky dialogue and turns you'll see coming, the script still finds its way to a heartfelt ending. Far from a howler. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **It doesn't quite marry up underlying themes with its hairy horror surface, but *Wolf Man* delivers strong performances, skin-crawling bodily changes and excellently scary sequences.**

also out

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FLIGHT RISK

★★★ FILM

"With its human-sized stakes, bruising fights and Mel Gibson's name on the credits, it's a bit like the '90s never went away. It won't win any awards for originality but this is a fun, unpretentious, tight 91 minutes." **IAN FREER**

PRIME TARGET

★★ TV

"As lively as a statistics manual and just as riveting. With clunky dialogue and tired action tropes, it all feels like a problem to solve rather than a show to be savoured." **DAVID OPIE**

BRING THEM DOWN

★★★ FILM

"This Irish thriller is as dour as they come. It can be frustrating — men will literally engage in a violent sheep-based turf war instead of going to therapy — but first-time writer-director Christopher Andrews tightens the screws nicely." **JOHN NUGENT**

THE KILLER'S GAME

★★ FILM

"While a mid-movie twist lands well, the pieces never cohere into a satisfying whole. The film's leery sense of laddish humour and guitar-chugging score leave it feeling like an early 2000s relic. Sadly, not in a fun way." **BEN TRAVIS**

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD SPIDER-MAN

★★★★ TV

"Multiversal storytelling has proven that no one version of a character is definitive, and this is a welcome addition to the wallcrawler's ever-growing legacy. We'll happily hang in this neighbourhood a while longer." **AMON WARMANN**

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT

FOR ALMOST 30 YEARS, IT'S BEEN THE ACTION FRANCHISE TO END ALL ACTION FRANCHISES. AS TOM CRUISE AND THE TEAM OUTDO THEMSELVES ONCE MORE, IS *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING* THE END OF ETHAN HUNT?

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

LTS

"OUR LIVES ARE THE SUM OF OUR CHOICES,"

a wise man by the name of Eugene Kittridge once said. And few people know that better than Tom Cruise. In 1993, Cruise, already the biggest movie star on the planet, met with Sherry Lansing, then head of Paramount Pictures, to discuss the film he had chosen to make his producing debut. It's doubtful that Lansing expected Cruise to plump for an adaptation of a 1960s TV show perhaps best known for its gadgets, guises and banging theme tune. "I had studied what circus guys were doing with wires and the new kind of rigs they were using," Cruise tells *Empire*. "And I was like, 'I'm going to apply that to live-action, and to a spy story.' That's why I chose *Mission: Impossible*. I wanted to make a movie that I felt was going to be commercial, and the kind of film that I wanted to make."

That was choice number one. Since then, the *Mission: Impossible* franchise has been the sum of Cruise's choices, including — but not limited to — installing Brian De Palma as director ("such a pro, so elegant"); casting himself as the film's lead, a gifted super-spy called Ethan Hunt, who was in every conceivable way the anti-James Bond; going for a grounded, in-camera approach to the film's action sequences; hiring different directors (John Woo, J.J. Abrams, Brad Bird) for each of the three sequels that followed; and then, finally, teaming up with his long-term creative partner, Christopher McQuarrie, for the trio of films — *Rogue Nation* (2015), *Fallout* (2018) and *Dead Reckoning* (2023) — that really established the template of insane stunts, performed by Cruise at huge personal risk, wedded to emotional, complex, character-driven spy stories. Those choices have helped to establish the *Mission: Impossible* series as one of the most critically acclaimed and beloved franchises around.

And the sums have been choice. Seven films in just under 30 years, with a total worldwide gross of just over $4 billion. Not bad at all. It is the defining work of Cruise's career, even more so than the Les Grossman dance. And yet there's a chance that it might be coming to an end with the eighth instalment. Could *Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning* be *Mission: Impossible*'s final reckoning?

Some context might be required. Or, if you will, a *Mission* briefing.

In 2019, following the success of *Mission: Impossible — Fallout*, which had bowled over critics with its combo of deft character work, sensational stunts and Henry Cavill's moustache, it was announced that Cruise and McQuarrie would be returning for not one, but two sequels, to be filmed back-to-back. These films, McQuarrie would later tell *Empire*, would be a two-parter so

Left: Tom Cruise and director Christopher McQuarrie push themselves to the limit for a gnarly underwater stunt. **Above:** Back on dry land, the pair prep a scene with Ving Rhames, back as Luther. **Right:** Hayley Atwell returns as the previously light-fingered Grace.

vast in scope that they "would swallow the franchise whole".

Only they themselves got swallowed, by the Covid-19 pandemic that kicked in just before filming was due to begin. That epic saga has been chronicled in these pages before; suffice it to say that things did not go as planned. "The entire process, as we outlined in 2019 while we were in post on *Top Gun: Maverick*," says McQuarrie now, "was that this will be two-and-a-half years of really intense work in order to get these two movies out."

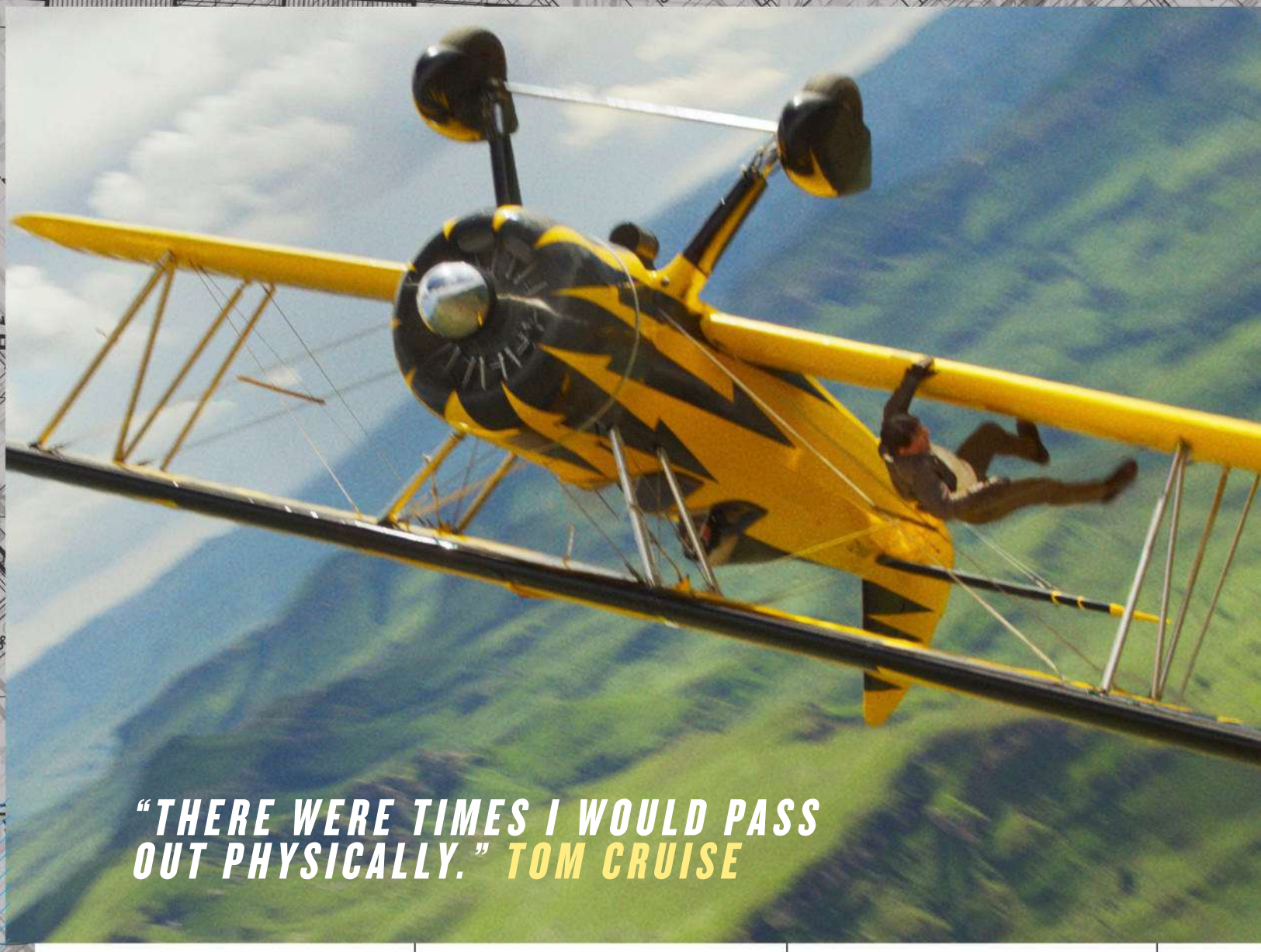
In the end, the first of those movies, *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One*, was released in July 2023, a year after the intended debut of *Dead Reckoning Part Two*, which had already begun filming. It was a rollicking good time, an epic action movie which saw Ethan Hunt and his buddies in the IMF (Impossible Mission Force) come up against a seemingly unstoppable adversary, in the shapeless shape of a malevolent AI known as the Entity. Featuring some of the best action sequences in this, or any other, franchise, including an astonishing train crash, it was widely praised by critics, considered to be one of the best entries in the series, and was tipped to improve upon *Fallout*'s franchise-high $791 million.

Except, that didn't happen. Although *Dead Reckoning Part One* wound up in the top ten movies of the year, it did so with $570 million. Which meant that it was seen in some quarters as something of an under-performer. "It was disappointing," says Simon Pegg, who has played IMF agent Benji Dunn since 2006's *Mission: Impossible III*. "We knew we'd made an amazing film."

In the aftermath, people cast around for a smoking gun. Had audiences reacted negatively to the death of Rebecca Ferguson's fan-favourite character Ilsa Faust? Were they daunted by the '*Part One*' subtitle? Had the film's big stunt, in which Cruise drives a bike off a cliff, been somewhat sullied by over-exposure before the film opened? Pegg thinks he has the answer. "It was the Barbenheimer factor," he says. Sure enough, *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* opened just a week after *Dead Reckoning*, taking most of its IMAX screens, and sucking away the oxygen of publicity. No hard feelings, though. "All power to *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* for having that moment, because it was quite extraordinary. Me and Tom went to watch those films together, and had a blast."

Whatever the reason, or reasons, for *Dead Reckoning*'s fate at the box office, McQuarrie is philosophical. "It didn't work for everybody," he says. "Elements of the film didn't work for everybody. I feel it, I hear it, and I respect it. I don't look at those people and go, 'They didn't get it.' That's a fucking cop-out. Tom and I looked at that, as we look at every movie. If the movie made $600 million or six dollars, I would say it could have been better. For everybody that had a great time, we honoured our commitment. For everybody that didn't, we don't stop. We do not fucking stop."

If there's one obvious, direct consequence of *Dead Reckoning*'s box office, it's this: farewell, ›



"THERE WERE TIMES I WOULD PASS OUT PHYSICALLY." TOM CRUISE

Dead Reckoning Part Two (and, indeed, *Part One*, which is now just *Dead Reckoning*). Hello, *The Final Reckoning*. "After the first film came out, we all evaluated," explains McQuarrie. "Nothing changed about quote-unquote 'Part Two', but we understood that that title could potentially lead to someone saying, 'I didn't see the other movie.'"

It's that title change that has set tongues wagging. Principally, the use of the word "final". There's something about "final" that suggests, well, finality. Combined with the sombre tone of the trailer, which concludes with Ethan asking someone to, "Trust me... one last time," it does rather suggest that the film might function as a farewell to Ethan Hunt. So, Tom Cruise, what do you say?

"You gotta see the movie," laughs Cruise, deploying the straightest of bats. "It's a hard thing for me to discuss at the moment, because it really is something that you have to experience."

Even the reliably loquacious McQuarrie, a man who talks not in paragraphs but in podcasts, becomes somewhat circumspect when *Empire* raises the subject. "It is, I hope, the satisfying conclusion to a 30-year story arc," he says. "I'm pretty confident that people are going to feel that the title was appropriate."

None of this, of course, is a confirmation that this is the final film, or that Ethan's going to cark it. So put your obits for a fictional character on hold for now. But it's not a denial either. And Cruise and McQuarrie are throwing everything they have at this one. Almost like a victory lap. If this *isn't* the final *Mission: Impossible* movie, it's going to be a hard one to top. Because if you thought the stunts that the pair had pulled off previously were wild, wait until you see what they've lined up this time. "We're throwing it in," pledges Cruise. "We want to go hard!"

When Cruise was six years old, he boarded a plane for the very first time. "I looked outside as we were going down the runway," he remembers. "And my thought was, 'What would it be like to be on the wing?'"

Nearly 60 years later, he finally found out.

When *The Final Reckoning* begins, some time has elapsed from the previous movie. Enough time for Ethan to grow out his hair, and for the Entity to get its hooks into the global infrastructure. "It's frightening how prescient certain things in the movie are," says McQuarrie. "And I hope, by the time the movie comes out, they're not as prescient as they could be."

There are, essentially, seven days to go until the end of the world. Anything that uses modern technology is vulnerable, which is just one reason why Ethan, being more anti-Entity than Tina Turner, finds himself on the wing of a Boeing Stearman, a 1930s biplane, at 10,000 feet.

Cruise, being Cruise, performed all the stunts himself when the production moved to a remote location in South Africa, with nothing between him and headline news but a wire, his own athleticism, and the skill of the Stearman's pilot. Cruise is no stranger to planes, of course, but this was different. Gnarly, gruelling and "cold", he says, walking *Empire* through it step-by-step months later. "When you stick your face out, going over 120 to 130 miles an hour, you're not getting oxygen. So I had to train myself how to breathe. There were times I would pass out physically; I was unable to get back into the cockpit."

All in all, Cruise has spent more time on the wing than Mo Salah. And that's just for one part of an extended sequence that may contain more stunts than most movies manage in their entire runtimes. "There are stunts in this movie that will melt your brain," laughs McQuarrie. "There

Left: Cruise grips onto a 1930s Boeing biplane. **Above, top to bottom:** Simon Pegg's Benji; Angela Bassett as new POTUS Erika; Grace under pressure?

would be a day in Africa — any day in Africa — where Tom would go out and do something that topped anything he had ever done before."

He's not kidding. In early January, *Empire* is invited to the nondescript London building that houses the *Final Reckoning* edit facilities (complete with fake street-signs on the walls with names like 'Cruise Mews' and [earlier *Mission* villain] 'Solomon Lane'), to see some footage from the sequence. And we can confirm that it contains a stunt so staggeringly dangerous that, when we first see it, we let out an involuntary yelp. A few days later, when we tell Cruise of our reaction, he lets out an equally involuntary giggle of delight. "I want to pin you to your seat," he smiles, "to give you a physical reaction, and engross you in the storytelling." Job done.

We're not going to tell you exactly what that stunt is. You'll know it when you see it. But you should know this — it is so dangerous that even McQuarrie was antsy about it. "I truly want to puke thinking about the stress," says the director. "It was intense."

You should also know that Cruise did it 19 times in total. "He approached me to do number 20," says McQuarrie. "And I said, 'You're done.' Do not anger the gods."

And you should probably *also* know that it isn't even the most dangerous thing Cruise did for *The Final Reckoning*. For that, he had to go underwater.

Ethan spent much of *Dead Reckoning* in pursuit of the two-part key that could be the, well, key to stopping the Entity, acquiring it only at the end. Now, all he had to do was find the birthplace of the Entity, a sunken next-generation Russian submarine called the Sevastopol, and use the key to theoretically gain control of the rampant AI-hole.

There was just one problem: while we, the audience, knew that the Sevastopol's final resting place was somewhere in the Arctic, Ethan hadn't the foggiest. Part of *The Final Reckoning* will see Ethan and his team (Pegg's Benji, Hayley Atwell's Grace, Pom Klementieff's Paris and Greg Tarzan Davis' Degas) heading to the Arctic in search of the Sevastopol's last resting place. (In reality, the production decamped to the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard to film in conditions well below freezing. "I think we hit negative 36 degrees at one point," laughs Davis. "I saw a total of six polar bears.")

Empire's quest to find the Sevastopol is ›

M:IA

A STATUS REPORT ON THE IMF AGENTS WHO COULD SHOW UP IN *THE FINAL RECKONING*

BILLY BAIRD (JOHN POLSON)

Last seen.....*Mission: Impossible II*

A brash Australian pilot, Billy rocks up in the Sydney-based *M:I-2*, shouts a bit, and amazingly isn't killed. Would now likely be played by a Hemsworth.

DECLAN GORMLEY (JONATHAN RHYS MEYERS)

Last seen.....*Mission: Impossible III*

An Irish pilot (who shares a surname with the film's first AD, Tommy Gormley), playboy Declan has an admirable ability to swear in Italian. *Così fan tutte*!

ZHEN (MAGGIE Q)

Last seen.....*Mission: Impossible III*

Crucial in the abduction of Philip Seymour Hoffman's baddie, Owen Davian. Blows up a swish sports car, then gets hurt stealing the Rabbit's Foot. Not so lucky, after all.

JANE CARTER (PAULA PATTON)

Last seen.....*Ghost Protocol*

Thirsty for revenge after her lover, fellow IMF agent Trevor Hanaway (Josh Holloway), gets bumped off, Jane slakes said thirst by kicking his killer out of a window at the Burj Khalifa. That'll do it.

WILLIAM BRANDT (JEREMY RENNER)

Last seen.....*Rogue Nation*

An analyst promoted in *Ghost Protocol*, Brandt became a key team member in that and *Rogue Nation*, but hasn't been seen since. Presumably he's gone back to Accounts, or whatever it was that he did.

much easier. We simply jump on a train, head to Longcross Studios, and there it is.

Because it's here where *Empire* rocks up on a muddy day last August, just a few days before Cruise will jump off the roof of the Stade de France at the closing ceremony of the Olympics, to visit the set of *The Final Reckoning*. It's here where the Sevastopol — which was destroyed by a self-inflicted torpedo blast at the beginning of *Dead Reckoning*, taken out by the Entity in an attempt to cover its tracks — rests in pieces. Literally.

On a soundstage so huge that *Empire* has to get into an industrial lift to reach the top, a giant water-tank (capacity: 8.5 million litres) has been installed on a ginormous gimbal (weight: 1,000 tons) which can lower, raise and rotate it as required. This is the base of the Sevastopol set, which has been broken into sections that can be lifted in and out by crane. Today's section is the sonarsphere, the distinctive room where the Entity came to life. Finally, after an up-at-dawn pride-swallowing siege that he will never fully tell you about, Ethan Hunt has made it inside the Sevastopol, and is about to insert the key into its lock.

But it's not that simple. Nothing is ever that simple in *Mission*. For something has displaced the submarine, and it has started to roll. Which means that Ethan, and Cruise, have to deal with a constantly shifting environment, and churning water. Lots of water. "Once you get that thing going and turn on that gimbal, it basically becomes its own ecosystem," says McQuarrie. "Underwater, there's a current that can't be predicted. It's such a massive engineering accomplishment."

In order to make the dive down to the sub, Ethan is wearing a special suit, which Cruise has had designed meticulously for maximum cinematic effect, with a faceplate that allows visibility and contains its own lighting rig. Between takes, Cruise beckons *Empire* over and gives us a masterclass in screen acting with a mask on. A mask that brings with it its own problem — Cruise can only stay in the suit for ten minutes at a time before suffering from hypoxia. "I'm breathing in my own carbon dioxide," says Cruise later. "It builds up in the body and affects the muscles. You have to overcome all of that while you're doing it, and be present. I remember when I was shooting with the key, going, 'Don't break anything!'"

Although it's undeniably thrilling to watch Cruise and McQuarrie do their thing, with McQuarrie donning a wetsuit and sliding into the water in order to direct Cruise at close-quarters with a series of bespoke hand signals, this scene, you won't be surprised, is *not* the most dangerous thing that Cruise and McQuarrie have ever conjured up. Back in August, that was still a couple of weeks away.

When *Empire* catches up with McQuarrie, it's late on a December night, and the sequence that he called "a meatgrinder", in which Ethan has to navigate a chamber filled with all kinds of dangerous debris and that ever-shifting water, is in the can. "It was so challenging and so terrifying," says McQuarrie. "Really physically punishing. He's in a rotating structure filled with debris, and you had to find a way to make that environment look as chaotic and unhinged as humanly possible, but in a way that you could repeat, and that Tom could navigate, and survive."

Right: The final reckoning for Ethan? **Below, top to bottom:** Team Hunt remain tight; Cold as ice — Pom Klementieff's deadly Paris; Esai Morales as the nefarious Gabriel.

The aerial sequence. The submarine sequence. The Arctic sequence. It would seem that this movie alone could swallow the *Mission* franchise whole, including *Dead Reckoning*. "It is the biggest *Mission*, in terms of scope and scale and breadth and depth," says McQuarrie. "On the other hand, it's a very intimate look at Ethan and what makes him tick. He is forced, over the course of this movie, to reflect on his life, and how he ended up here."

Along the way, Ethan's relationships will

"THERE ARE STUNTS IN THIS MOVIE THAT WILL MELT YOUR BRAIN." CHRISTOPHER McQUARRIE

evolve under the most extraordinary pressure. "I think it's a really beautiful study of a friendship," says Atwell of the relationship between her IMF newbie, the former pickpocket Grace, and Ethan. "But not an easy one, a very deeply connected one, complicated." In the Hunt hunt, he will be helped, and hindered, by an array of faces new and old. Including one *really* old face, from Ethan's dim and distant past. Remember William Donloe, the poor CIA analyst who ran back and forth to the loo while Ethan dangled daintily above his desk in the very first *Mission*? Well, he's back, played once again by Rolf Saxon. "We had scenes together," says Pom Klementieff, a *Mission* superfan who remembers watching the first movie on an old black-and-white TV in her native France. "And I saw him do a scene with another character that is very important to the story, and I was tearing up. It's a beautiful link between the movies."

McQuarrie is no fan of fan service. If he's bringing Donloe back — and he may not be the only old face returning — then it's for a damn good reason. After years where each episode was relatively self-contained, this *Mission*, like the Dude's rug, is going to reach out to the previous instalments and really tie the room together. "I wish you'd said that earlier," laughs McQuarrie. "We could have called it 'Mission: Impossible — The Dude's Rug'." There are going to be plenty of nods to the films that went before, to the sum of Ethan's choices. "It's an epic, emotional journey of the entire franchise," says Cruise. "It's Homeric."

This conversation with the past seems significant. As a wise man not named Eugene Kittridge once said, "We're in the endgame now." "It definitely has that feel about it," says Pegg. "It just feels like a really worthy title for the movie. It works on a lot of levels." Atwell says, "There is no final Tom Cruise. The man will live forever."

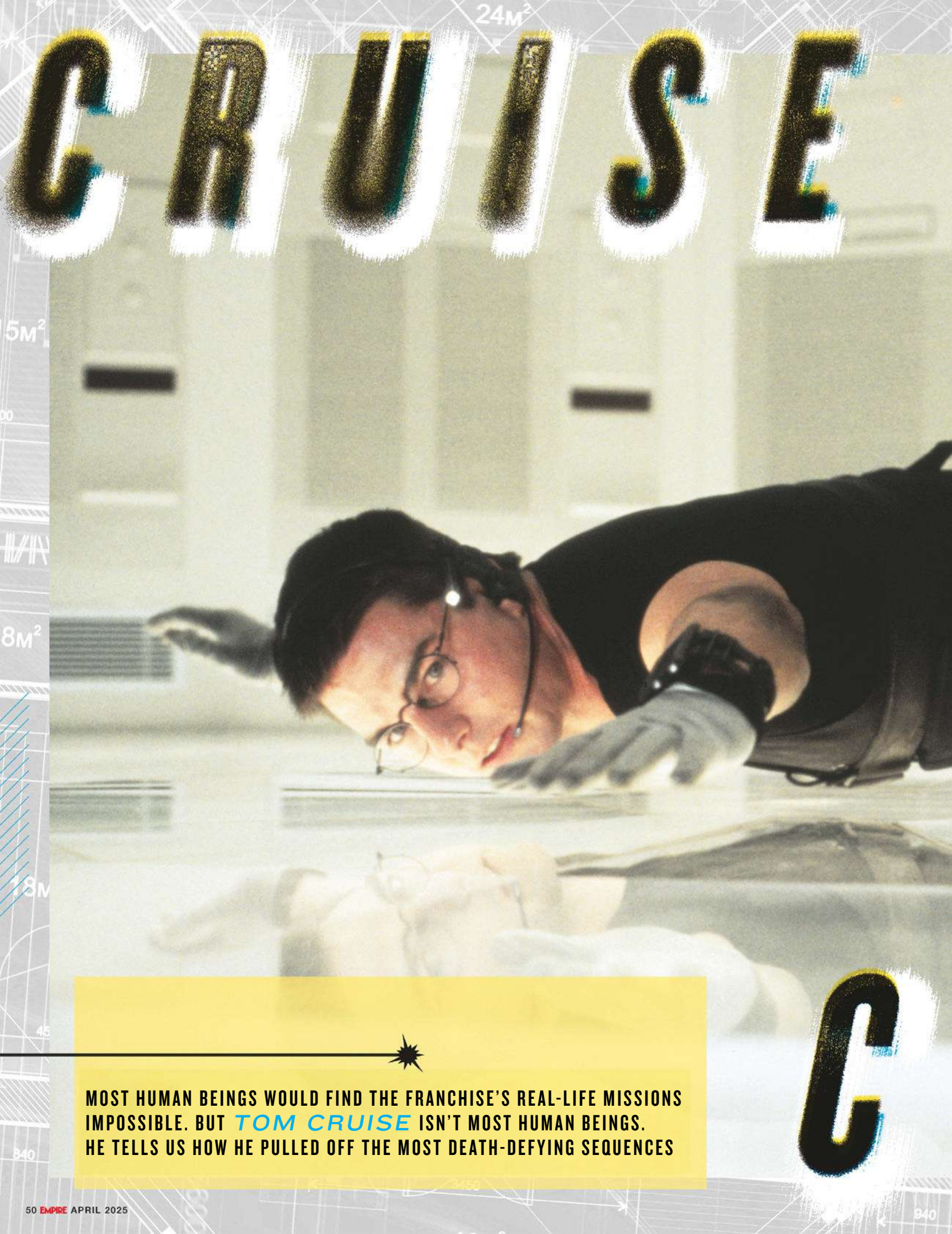
Doesn't mean that Ethan Hunt will. Although we'd be surprised if the door wasn't left ajar at the end of *The Final Reckoning*. Paramount could reboot with a new lead, but we've been here before (hello/goodbye, Jeremy Renner). A more likely scenario is that the duo who should be collectively known as McCruise are coming off an exhausting five-year *Mission* mission, and can be forgiven for wanting to do other things before coming back to it in a few years. "There's tons of other stuff that we're doing. We've got projects aplenty," says McQuarrie. "Other people can do what they want. If somebody does make another, I'll be there on opening night."

Cruise has already moved on to the new film by Alejandro G. Iñárritu (who was also there, briefly, on the day *Empire* visited the set). "For the first time in years, I'll get to watch a Tom Cruise movie and be completely surprised by it," laughs McQuarrie. What's done is done when they say it's done, but the pair simply aren't done. "I love working with him," says Cruise. "He's my creative brother."

If that is the case, and this is the last one for a while, it could be a fitting end to the journey Cruise began over 30 years ago. Because there's going out on a high, and then there's going out on the wing of a plane, 10,000 feet above the ground, wind whipping past your face, as you show your six-year-old former self — and the world — one important truth: nothing is impossible.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: THE FINAL RECKONING IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 MAY

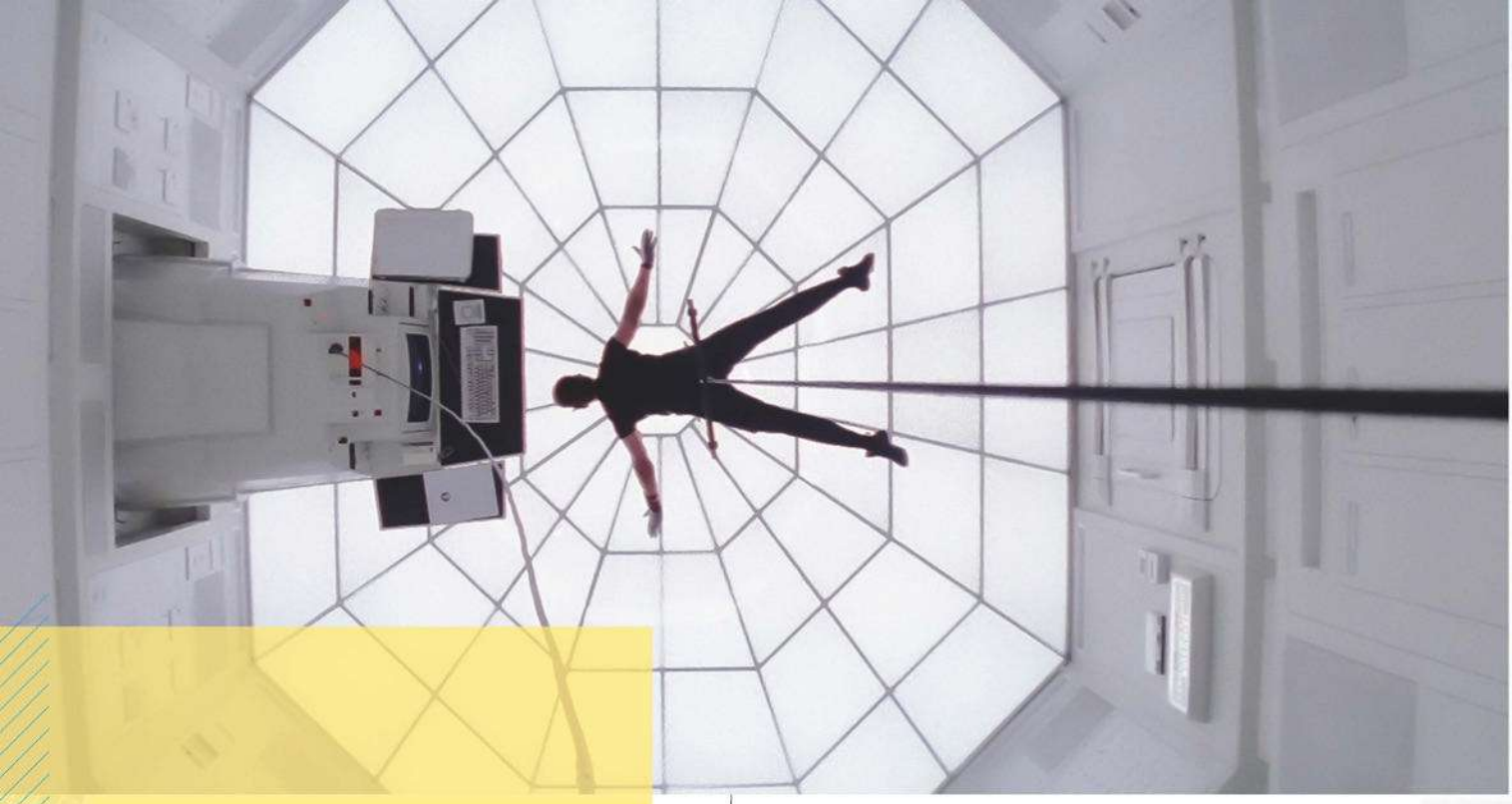
CRUISE



MOST HUMAN BEINGS WOULD FIND THE FRANCHISE'S REAL-LIFE MISSIONS IMPOSSIBLE. BUT *TOM CRUISE* ISN'T MOST HUMAN BEINGS. HE TELLS US HOW HE PULLED OFF THE MOST DEATH-DEFYING SEQUENCES

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

CONTROL



THE LANGLEY HEIST

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

(Brian De Palma..... 1996)

For some, it's still the signature sequence of the *Mission: Impossible* series, even though it doesn't involve a life-threatening stunt. Ethan Hunt infiltrates the CIA headquarters at Langley, to retrieve vital information from a high-tech, temperature-controlled computer vault that is seemingly impossible to access. Enter Ethan, gliding down from the ceiling in complete silence, showing perfect balance and poise before making off with the info...

"I was in Japan promoting a film, and De Palma called me and pitched me this. It was *Rififi*, but how do we do it? I knew this rig and I came back and showed him the rig that I wanted to wear. I was showing him different kinds of equipment and movement, and I would find out, 'What could I do? How could I move through this space? What looks elegant?' I would practise to make it look elegant. And we were testing different metals (*to hold Cruise in place*).

"The first metal I tested was soft, and it broke. If I'm up high and it breaks, that's a problem. I'll never forget that day, because when I go from the computer down to the floor, it was very challenging, physically. We wanted it all to be in one shot. And my face kept hitting the ground as I went down. So I went to the crew guys and said, 'Empty your pockets,' and put British [bank] notes in my toes, and balanced myself. And I went from the computer down, and didn't hit the ground. I'm holding, I'm holding, I'm holding it, and I was sweating. Everyone's holding their breath, and then I could hear Brian start laughing. He goes, 'Alright! Cut!' And we both laughed and hugged each other."

Clockwise from main: Tom Cruise's Ethan Hunt enters CIA headquarters like a ninja in the first *Mission: Impossible*; *Mission: Impossible II*'s nerve-jangling opening scene — Cruise hangs between two rocks at a terrifying height in Utah; In *Mission: Impossible III*, Cruise jumps off a roof at high speed in the Chinese village of Xitang.

HANGING TOUGH

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE II

(John Woo..... 2000)

The second *Mission* movie's introduction to Ethan is a belter, as we find the IMF's golden boy on a busman's holiday, enjoying a spot of free climbing in Moab, Utah. Cruise, naturally, did the climbing himself. The result is a clammy-palmed cracker.

"I wanted to do a climbing sequence. Throughout filming in Australia, there were weather challenges. It rained for 40 days. I felt like Noah. And the studio was like, 'Listen, because of the rain, and [because] the schedule is over, let's find another opening to the movie.' Every day people were coming in with different pitches. I was like, 'I don't know how else to open the movie.' So, now we're into the winter months in Moab, I've flown all the way from Australia, and there are gale force winds. So we can't even have my crew up on the mountain. I have pushed the studio for the opening of this movie, and you can't even get there to set up the camera. I am so exhausted from jet lag, and I don't know how to call the studio, and I'm not shooting, and you feel the pressure of shooting something, and for six months they've been wanting me to change the opening sequence. And what happened is, I remember waking up the next day, and I was just like, 'You have to confront this.' And the sun was coming up, and the wind was gone, and the temperatures had come up. So I was like, 'Let's get to the top of the mountain and just start shooting it now.'

"This is back in the days where you didn't have radios, and I'm free climbing as I'm going up to where I need to be for that opening shot. I had to pace myself, because I had to climb down afterwards, and if I fall, there's a cable that's going to get me, but I'm going to be slamming up against the mountain. And the rock is very soft rock. At certain times you're going, 'Jesus, I'm sliding, it's breaking away.' As I'm doing the Iron Cross (*a move where he is suspended between two pieces of rock*), I'm actually hanging there, but it isn't quite right, and you can see it. I was like, 'Just tell me this is the shot, because I can't do it again.' What people don't know is that there's a section where I'm jumping high to low, but my foot was broken. And I never mentioned it to anyone. Some of these injuries, what's the point? You just keep going. So I'm jumping, and my foot wasn't right. John Woo was like, 'We've got the shot.' I was like, 'No, we want it in one shot, I gotta keep doing it.' And that's the shot that's in the movie. But it was so much fun working with John, doing that sequence, because I knew it was our [marketing] campaign."

ON THE RUN

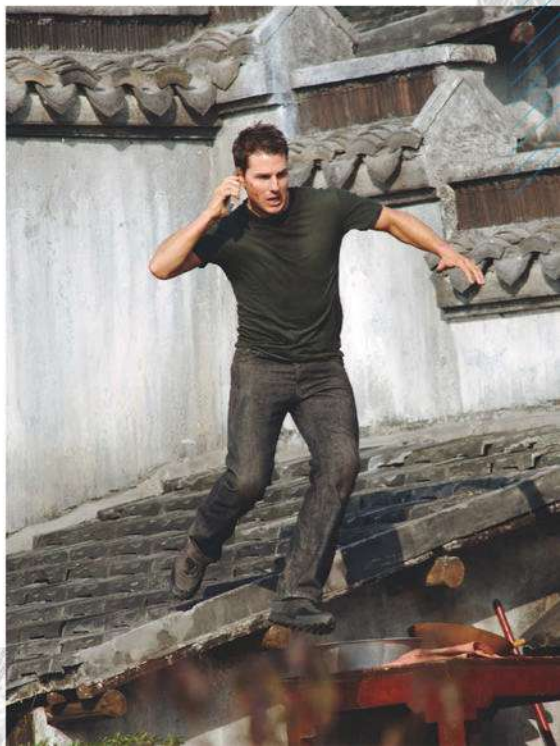
MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III

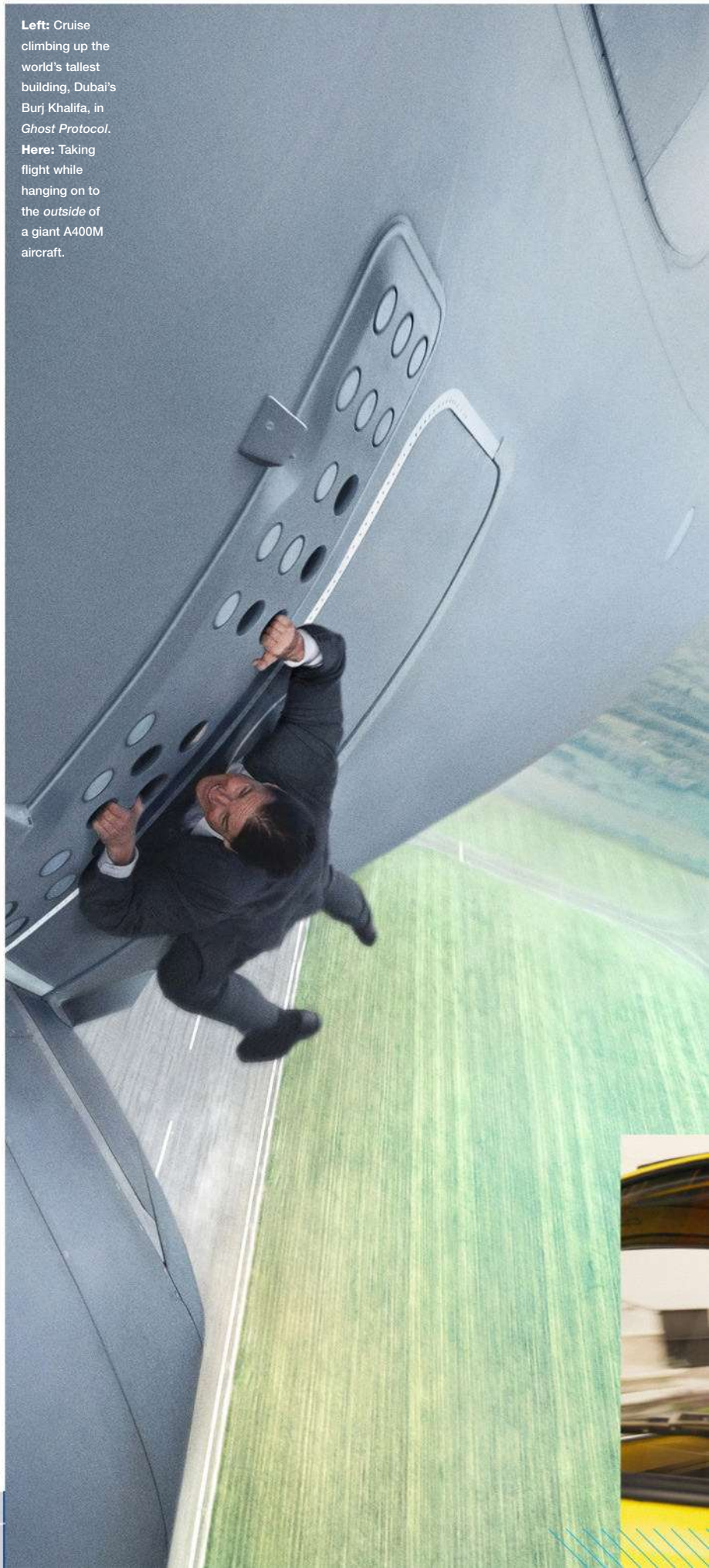
(J.J. Abrams..... 2006)

The threequel brought Ethan out of retirement and placed him at the head of a new team, searching for something called the Rabbit's Foot. Luck certainly needed to be on Cruise's side for a memorable sequence in which Ethan winds up in China, and finds himself on the run. What, did you think we were going to compile a list of *Mission: Impossible*'s greatest moments and not include one where Ethan Hunt runs (and runs, and runs some more)?

"At that time, we were the first big American movie in China, we were working with the Chinese community and film community, and that was really wonderful. We shot in Xitang, a 2,000-year-old fishing village, and I'm coming out of a building and jumping down, in one shot. That's such a long sprinting shot, particularly at the end of a movie, when my body needs a little bit of rehab and rest. All of those people [Ethan runs past] are actually from the village, and I'm in front of their homes, and it was a very narrow walkway.

"That shot only works if you get it all in one. It was a very challenging shot to get, because I had to know how fast the camera could go, and they had to know how fast I'm going to go, so I had to go full speed for a long, long period of time and do it over and over and over again until we got our rhythm and timing right. If I slow down, that camera is not with me. And if someone in that community stepped in front of me, there's no possible way I could have stopped. So I walked all along that walkway with my Chinese translator, and made sure I spent time with them, telling them what we were going to do, and asking them to please stay in their position. And everyone was so helpful. It was beautiful."





Left: Cruise climbing up the world's tallest building, Dubai's Burj Khalifa, in *Ghost Protocol*. **Here:** Taking flight while hanging on to the *outside* of a giant A400M aircraft.

GETTING HIGH

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — GHOST PROTOCOL

(Brad Bird ..... 2011)

The Burj Khalifa, in Dubai, is the world's tallest man-made structure, narrowly eclipsing Peter Crouch. But it's arguably more famous for being the setting of the most dangerous stunt in Cruise's career up until that point, as Ethan must, for reasons, climb up and along its exterior, with nothing more than a malfunctioning glove standing between him and a short but eventful plummet.

"When I got to *Ghost Protocol*, I said, 'I want to make a movie on that building.' I saw architecturally what they were doing. The sequence that Brad Bird designed is beautiful. He understood the physics of it. What's amazing is his opening frame, when I'm going out the window. That's the shot that sells the vertigo. To get that IMAX camera there to get that shot was very complex. I had to figure out how to do it, so I built, on a soundstage, an entire wall of metal and glass, and we had it as hot as it could be. I knew I needed gloves, because of the heat of the building. What happens if it's so hot I can't touch it? What's the wind like? So I would sprint up and down the building on the soundstage, just to get used to it.

"When we got to Dubai, I only had one night to rehearse on the actual building itself. I padded up — on the day I'm doing it, I don't have pads — and the sun is starting to set. I've spent time climbing the building, but this is me running across the building, holding on, and then going across. So I start sprinting, holding on to this rope, on a very small single pick. And the wire is so tiny. Before I go, I look down at this little bolt and, for the first time, start recognising, 'Well, that's very small! I didn't realise how small it is!' And your mind starts thinking about things like this. But I push off, and suddenly I'm out there in space, and I'm arcing, and I feel the wind and I'm picking up speed. I'm headed toward the building, and I thought I was going to be able to naturally slow and land on my feet, but I realise the impact is going to be on my skull and my neck and I'm going to have compression. At the last second, I was able to wrench my body around and go, like Wile E. Coyote, bang into this picture-window glass. I hit so hard. I saw stars. I could even see the windows vibrating. And I checked my body. Nothing's broken. And then I see all the crew looking at me with big eyes going, 'Oh my God.' And it's okay. I'm okay.

"I wake up in the morning and the sun is bright, and I have no pads, and I go out and I was able to do it correctly. It's such a beautiful sequence. It was a privilege."

FULL THROTTLE

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — ROGUE NATION

(Christopher McQuarrie..... 2015)

The Burj Khalifa sequence effectively cemented the recent *Mission* tradition of having at least one insanely dangerous Cruise stunt. Here, the stakes were raised for the film's cold open, in which Ethan finds himself clinging onto a giant A400M aircraft as it takes off. So, Cruise also found himself on the outside of a giant A400M aircraft as it took off.

"McQ was like, 'Oh, look at this airplane, how would you like to hang off that airplane?' I said, 'Sure!' He later told me he was joking. So we set it up. We're doing it. We had to go through a tremendous amount of engineering to make sure that if anything happened, that the camera wouldn't come off and hit me and kill me. There was a runway [at RAF Wittering] that we had to clean, to make sure there were no particles that could come up and hit me. And I came up with the idea of using square lenses to protect my eyes, so I could keep my eyes open for the close-up.

"On the day, it was freezing. I was strapped in, and we had hand signals for if I was in trouble. Once I am out there, you can't get me in. I'm out there for the whole ride. So now I'm taxiing and I'm ingesting fuel because I'm right in the exhaust. Because he's my friend, and I know he's nervous, I call McQ and say, 'Listen, man. No matter what, don't stop. If I look scared, I'm acting. Don't stop. I'm gonna do this.' We're at the top of the runway, and I could feel it. The pilot goes full throttle and I'm like, 'Here we go.' We start blasting down that runway, and I'm getting hit with the heat and the exhaust, and on the first take I got hit with something. Some particle hit me in the ribs. It knocked the wind out of me. I didn't tell anyone about the stone. What's the point, you know? And so we didn't get it on the first take. The more times you do it, you start to feel the performance, and when my feet should come off the ground. So we decided to hold on a little longer so we could get it when we're off the ground. And then we finally got it."

TOILET TEAR-UP

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — FALLOUT

(Christopher McQuarrie..... 2018)

Above: *Fallout*: A punch-up in a public toilet between Hunt, Walker (Henry Cavill) and Lark (Liang Yang) saw Cruise getting kicked in the stomach for real. **Bottom left:** A hair-raisingly fast chase through Rome in a Fiat, in *Dead Reckoning*.

The most bruising bout in the entire franchise, as Ethan and Henry Cavill's August Walker go toe-to-toe with Liang Yang's 'John Lark' in a lavishly appointed bathroom that gets less and less lavishly appointed as it gets smashed along the way...

"That fight in the bathroom, how it evolved was, we have those shots that had to be able to play in long cuts. It was, 'Cut when you want to, not when you have to.' Ethan's fighting style changes a little bit throughout each film, but you want that. Just like in a musical, the behaviour of the actors in a fight dictates actors. Liang's a dervish. McQ came up with the idea that Henry was a hammer, and that dictated his fighting style. I love Henry pumping his arms. That guy is so talented. He didn't back off. Being flipped is brutal, and he's a big guy and he's hitting the ground. But we all knew what we were going for. I got kicked in the stomach. That was real. Now, I know that the camera's there, and I know the frame, and I went down. We didn't want it to feel polished."

THE ITALIAN JOB

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — DEAD RECKONING

(Christopher McQuarrie..... 2023)

There hadn't been a standout car chase in the series until the impishly inventive one in *Dead Reckoning*, which sees Ethan Hunt and Grace (Hayley Atwell) trying to lose a posse of pursuers in Rome, while driving a frankly psychotic Fiat 500. Oh, and they're handcuffed together, meaning Ethan is somewhat hampered...

"That car was very tricky to drive, because of the way it was set up. [At] high speed and drifting on cobblestones, there are moments in there that just happened, and we seized on it. It's not like we have all day to shoot all this stuff in Rome, so the performances have to be there in the midst of a very high-speed car chase where I'm driving a car with one hand. I sleep better at night when it's just me on a motorcycle, even if I'm going into traffic with cars coming at me. So I felt added responsibility when Hayley was there. When I was driving, I had not only the cameras hanging around the car so it's difficult to see outside, but also, at times, a camera car with a camera right in front of us. There were times when Hayley was like, 'That camera is really close!' I was like, 'It's good, we're good, don't worry!' Her performance is so alive and immediate and engaged. When you see a two-shot of two actors in a frame, and they're living in that frame, it just has something that you can't quantify. Lightning in a bottle."

WORDS
HAYLEY CAMPBELL

THE DEFI

OF LATE, JAMIE LEE CURTIS HAS RADICALLY SHAKEN UP HER CAREER. AND WITH A POWERFUL

ANTONE

PERFORMANCE IN THE LAST SHOWGIRL, SHE TELLS US WHY SHE'S DONE WITH COMPROMISING

ROBERT ASCROFT

Jamie Lee Curtis, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 7 December 2024.

JAMIE LEE CURTIS

DOES NOT

LIKE A MOOD BOARD.

THIS IS WHAT *EMPIRE*

DISCOVERED ON OUR

PHOTOSHOOT: THAT

TRYING TO BEND

JAMIE LEE CURTIS

INTO A

PREDETERMINED PLAN

IS THE QUICKEST WAY

TO MAKE HER GRUMPY.

"I was *so* grumpy!" she says a couple of days later over Zoom, laughing. She'd seen our suggested looks and she hated the poses, hated the clothes. She wanted to wear a Loewe blouse she saw Dan Levy wear on a red carpet, with a collar swept up like it was caught in the wind — the chicest thing she had ever seen — but most of all, she just wanted to be herself. Obviously, *Empire* went along with it — we're not monsters. "As soon as we started shooting, I was the happiest person because I was *free*," she says. "I was on fire! I was shaking because I felt that I had existed, and that I wasn't trying to pretend to be anybody."

This is a new era for Curtis. Having broken out in 1978 with John Carpenter's *Halloween*, her career has spanned genres: she went from scream queen to comedy — earning BAFTA nominations for *Trading Places* and *A Fish Called Wanda*, winning the former — before dangling below a helicopter in James Cameron's explosive *True Lies*. But now she is finally getting to do what she always wanted to do — playing characters that are varied, complex and real. In *The Last Showgirl* she plays Annette, a veteran Las Vegas cocktail waitress and best friend to Pamela Anderson's Shelly, battling a gambling addiction and diminishing hours. In *The Bear* she stressed everyone out as Donna Berzatto, Carmy's emotionally volatile mother. And then there was IRS inspector Deirdre Beaubeirdre, in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, which won her an Academy Award.

Clearly, magic happens if you let Jamie Lee Curtis do what she wants to do. "I blew up the mood boards because I'm not who you think I am," she says, defiant. "That's probably the biggest crux of it: I'm not who you think I am. Let me show you. I am way more than you think I am."

There's been a change recently in the roles you're taking on — they're weirder, darker, deeper. When did that happen?
Halloween [1978] to me is my first character work, and then my last character work for a long time, until I reclaimed it. After *The Fog*, I had TV shows, my personality came out. From then on, the most detailed character work was, "What size jeans do you wear?" They just sort of ran Jamie through different spin cycles. That changed, really, with Laurie Strode [in the David Gordon Green-directed *Halloween*] in 2018 because that woman was specific and curated. It was about something bigger than just 'Laurie Strode was now 40 years older'. A lot of shit had happened to her. So I think that freed me, because right after that came *Knives Out*. Going back to that character work was important to me — hiding myself, and letting the character actually do the work.

When you say Laurie Strode was your first character work, what do you mean?
If you think back to when I was 19, I was *fly*. I was a bit of a party girl. I could throw it down. And the three parts that were available in *Halloween* were: the flirty, promiscuous cheerleader — I was a cheerleader in high school! I knew what *that* girl was; then there was the snarky, smart-alec best friend... I mean, (*points at self*) I *am* your snarky best friend; or Laurie Strode — quiet, introspective, virginal, not experienced, innocent, intellectual dreamer. But it was written on the page. So when I auditioned for that part, John Carpenter had never met Jamie. John Carpenter didn't know me. I walked in as Laurie Strode and got the part. It's always amused me because now you know me, you would have passed me as any one of those other parts, but not Laurie Strode. I actually dressed that character: the costume person and I went to Kmart and bought her back-to-school clothes. Everything had to match: the skirt, the top, the sweater. And so that was, to me, the first building of a movie character that was not Jamie.

With Annette in *The Last Showgirl*, how much of her was on the page and how much did you build?
There was no question to me who Annette was. I knew her backstory, I knew everything about her — it was evident in the writing. [But] the creation of what characters look like is, for me, a really wonderful part of it. The math adds up that Annette has been hustling in Vegas for ›

Jamie Lee Curtis as Vegas 'bevertainer' Annette in *The Last Showgirl*.

Previous page: Dress: Wolford. Shoes: Ralph Lauren.
This page: Suit and custom shirt: Loewe

"MY TALENT IS THAT I GET GOOSEBUMPS ON MY ARMS WHEN I'M IN THE ZONE."

40 years. That means she's been in the sun for 40 years, the way we used to be in the sun. I'm from Southern California — I'm an olive-complected Hungarian Jewess, I tan like a cocoa bean. I mean, now I'm an old white woman who tries to stay out of the sun, but back in the day I was sitting there with reflectors and Orange Gelée Bain de Soleil all over me. And so I wanted Annette to look like *that*. I wanted her to look like someone who's been in the sun every day of her life for the last 40 years. I knew I wanted her to be a bottle redhead; I wanted it to look like it wasn't a good dye job. And her rust-coloured suede jacket was crucial to me — I wanted her to own something that was valuable enough to hock, but that she kept getting it back from that pawn shop. She didn't own anything worth any money at all, except that one jacket, and there were many times she had to hock it to get the 50 bucks to be able to pay her rent or to pay back a gambling debt or whatever the fuck it was. I'm very specific, but I also show up fully loaded.

It's quite rare to speak to an actor who becomes this involved in costume details.
I buy her purse, I buy her wallet, I buy her glasses. I work very closely with the prop department.

Why?
It has to feel *real*. It has to feel like a purse that I've carried for a long time, like a jacket I've worn for a long time.

Gia Coppola [director of *The Last Showgirl*] said that Annette's dance scene was not in the script. How did that come about?
[Gia and I] were walking around the casino and met this beautiful African-American woman who worked at a bar. She said, "I'm not a cocktail waitress, I'm a *bevertainer*." It's a term coined by the casinos to get around the unions — she's a cocktail waitress, but she also entertains. A *bevertainer*. They have those little platforms all over the casino where three times a shift, you go up to your little platform. And so this young woman said to me, "Would you like me to dance for you?" I felt very uncomfortable, because it felt intimate. And then she said, "I have to, it's part of my job." And she went over to her platform, and she danced to her track. Even though she was young and gorgeous, *nobody* looked. People are hitting the slots, and nobody's watching. We watched with rapt attention, and when she finished, we clapped. Nobody else clapped. She came down a little sweaty, and went back to serving drinks. I gave her a tip and thanked her, and we walked away, and Gia said to me, "Annette should dance." I said, "I don't think so! I think we have enough work to do in three days!" She goes, "Yeah, Annette should dance." And then we were walking into the rehearsal room, and 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart' was playing on the sound system. And I said to Gia — *jokingly!* — that if Annette was a bevertainer, that would be her track.

Two days later, we were doing the scene where I'm walking around with the tray and she walked up to me and said, "Annette's going to dance in five minutes." I was like, "*What?!*" No. And then that was it. Annette danced. And it was exactly like what happened to that young woman: I got up there, nobody watched. She's sort of dancing for herself. We did it once, I walked down the stairs, we moved on to the next scene. Never thought about it again. And then I saw the movie, and I saw how Gia utilised that as a storytelling device, and it broke my heart. Kills me every time. That's the beauty of filmmaking — it's not in the script, but it's part of the music of a story, and then you use it in such a perfect way, at such a perfect time, and you're seeing the dreams of these people dissolve in front of their eyes.

How did it compare to shooting the dance scene in *True Lies*, in which your character performs a kind of striptease?
That was a similar situation. I knew that it was going to happen, [but] originally, I was naked. I said to [James Cameron], "Look, you make the movie you want to make. I'll do whatever you want me to do here. [But] the truth of the matter is, if I'm naked, you're gonna lose your audience." Because, you know, I looked good naked at that point! I said to him, "I am concerned that it's going to distract from what is really a comedy scene."

I remember when that movie came out, there were a lot of protests — or, you know, protests with a lowercase 'p' — by women feeling that [Arnold Schwarzenegger's character] objectified his wife, or that putting her in that position was denigrating to women. I was like, *He was giving her the gift of freedom and liberation and excitement that her quotidian life did not give her!* So I loved it. And I actually [had gone] to Jim's offices and showed him what that sequence could look like, and I constructed it on my own: I had a black velvet dress, and I went to the fabric store and bought some black tulle and made sleeves and a little peplum and a little neck piece. And then I unzipped my dress and was wearing a bra and panties. And I said, "I think it's better if I'm in this for the dance sequence."

On the day we shot that, he said, "What song do you want to dance to?" And I chose John Hiatt. There was no choreographer; she just gets her groove on — and Jim had never seen me get my groove on. I don't get my groove on in my daily life — I was married, I had a young child. And I remember it got very quiet. And then he called, "Cut." It was just sort of weird. And Jim came over to me, and he said, "If I put a crash pad on the floor, will you let go of the bed post?" What I now know is, it got a little sexy...

It got *too* real?
Yes, and it stopped being funny. I've been an actor since I was 19 and the biggest laugh I ever got in a movie *ever*, including *A Fish Called Wanda*, was letting go of that bed post in *True* ›

Top to bottom: Breaking out as Laurie Strode in John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978); And returning to the role in David Gordon Green's 2018 sequel of the same name; Dancing to John Hiatt in 1994's *True Lies*.

Dress: Wolford; Cape: Dolce & Gabbana; Shoes: Gianvito Rossi

"LATELY I'VE BEEN ABLE TO BECOME CHARACTERS WHICH HAVE FREED ME FROM ANY VANITY."

Lies. It's absolutely a pin to a balloon of sexual tension, and it's just effing funny. But that moment is another example of not knowing what was going to happen. All it says [in the script] is: "She dances."

Roles having some basis in reality seems important to you. What about Deirdre Beaubeirdre in a batshit film like *Everything Everywhere All At Once*?
I *know* Deirdre. I've met her before. This is a woman who nobody touches. That job is her power. She controls people. She can make their life miserable, or she can make their life great. The reason she had [fake] nails is because that's the only time every week somebody touched her. She would get her nails done at the little Vietnamese nail place down the street from where she lived, because somebody would touch her.

My only criteria for the work I do is, "Do I believe it? Do I believe that person exists lock, stock and barrel?" That's my criteria. I have no trained talent, and so for me, my talent is that I get goosebumps on my arms when I'm in the zone. When something moves me, my body responds, and I go, "Oh, okay, I'm where I'm supposed to be." It's that clear to me — that's the truth telling.

You also made a quite famous statement against the unreality of show business by posing in *More* magazine in 2002 just as you were: in your underwear, no make-up, no retouching. It was a seismic moment.
I don't like the fantasy part of show-off business. Every red carpet is a fashion statement that absolutely terrifies me, because it's this fantasy — as if these people own those clothes, as if they look like that. That idea that we put that out into the world. That posturing is something that I am not comfortable with. I go out and buy my dresses because I want to feel and look like an authentic human being. That's my goal in the whole thing. I hate the fantasy part of it and yet it's the game. And I try to play the game, but I also want to question the game. *More* magazine came up because I had already done plastic surgery. I had tried it. It didn't work for me. You take fat from one place, it shows up in another. They don't tell you that, right? And so I had already humiliated myself by trying to alter myself to fit the requirement. And I'll tell you exactly where it happened. I was making the [1985] movie *Perfect*.

This is the one where you play the aerobics instructor who doesn't love journalists...
We were shooting the scene where John Travolta is in court and he's about to be sentenced to time in prison because he won't divulge a source. I'm sitting in the front row of the courtroom, and we were doing my coverage, and [cinematographer] Gordon Willis said out loud to the crew, "Oh, I'm not shooting her today — there are bags under her eyes." I was 28. I got plastic surgery before I turned 30.

Top to bottom: On Oscar-winning form in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*; 'Perfect' in *Perfect* (1985), but "riddled with insecurities"; As the mercurial Donna Berzatto in Disney+'s *The Bear*.

Because of what Gordon Willis said?
Oh, absolutely because of that, because I was feeling like I wasn't pretty enough and I couldn't sustain a movie career if Gordon Willis said he wouldn't shoot me because my eyes were puffy that day for whatever reason. That's what I was talking about in *More* magazine. What I realised is you were looking at pictures of me in *True Lies*. You were looking at me in *Perfect*. You were holding me up as some example of what women were supposed to look like — that was what the movie *Perfect* was about. My character has an argument with John Travolta and says, "What is so wrong with wanting to be perfect, wanting to be the best you can be? Why is that bad?" So here I was being held up as that example. And I've seen the movie *Perfect* and I did *not* know I looked like that when I looked like that. I was riddled with insecurities.

But when *Perfect* came out you became a sex symbol.
People were like, "Damn, girl!" And because of that, when I wrote books for children, one of my books was about self-esteem. And I realised in the selling of that book about feeling good about yourself, that I needed to acknowledge that I didn't feel good enough about myself. And so I said to *More* magazine, "I will do that [shoot], but I want you to take a picture of me with nothing on, in unflattering light, and show that picture, and then show the picture of me in beautiful light with all of the costuming and the make-up and the styling, and I want you to say how long it took, how many people, how much money it cost, and then put them side by side."

So that was 2002. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* came out in 2022, right? So that's 20 years later; I'm basically owning it because Deirdre Beaubeirdre is what I look like if I relax my entire body. I'm telling you, all of us walk around clenched. Many of us walk around in clothing that is designed to compress. But all I did was go without compression and relax and not worry about it. And that created Deirdre. That's all me. That's not a fat suit. That's not me putting on weight. That's what I looked like the day I showed up. And I wanted that to be real and just to be like, "Honestly, this is what many women look like." All of that is connected back to *More* magazine, and the beauty ideal that I have struggled with.

Your recent work really is the opposite of vanity — you're throwing everything into the character, whatever that requires.
Looking pretty in the movies was never my thing. It's just not who I am; it's just not been my currency. Whether you thought I was pretty or not, it wasn't like I felt like I was a great beauty and that the camera would love me. Lately I've been able to become characters which have freed me from any vanity, which then frees me as an artist — because then it doesn't matter, because then I'm just doing the work. And I've always wanted to do the work.

***THE LAST SHOWGIRL* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 FEBRUARY**

Earrings: Cathy Waterman; Jumpsuit: Safiyaa. Additional imagery: Hulu/Disney, Roadside Attractions

Styling: Jane Ross.
Make-up: Erin Ayanian Monroe
at Cloutier Remix using
Jones Road and Lashify.
Hair: Sean James using
Giovanni cosmetics and
FHI heat tools.

TO HELL AND BACK

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

AFTER THE BLIND CRIMEFIGHTER'S TV SERIES WAS ABRUPTLY CANCELLED IN 2018, HIS FUTURE LOOKED DARK. BUT NOW, WITH DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN, HE HAS RETURNED — AND DARKNESS IS VERY MUCH ON THE CARDS...

"VAMPIRES TRYING TO LIVE IN THE DAYLIGHT."

Empire has just asked Vincent D'Onofrio to describe the shared state of mind of his character Wilson Fisk, aka. Kingpin, and Charlie Cox's Matt Murdock, aka Daredevil, in *Daredevil: Born Again*. "They're trying to be something they're not," he continues. To be fair, they're more likely to be spilling blood than sucking it.

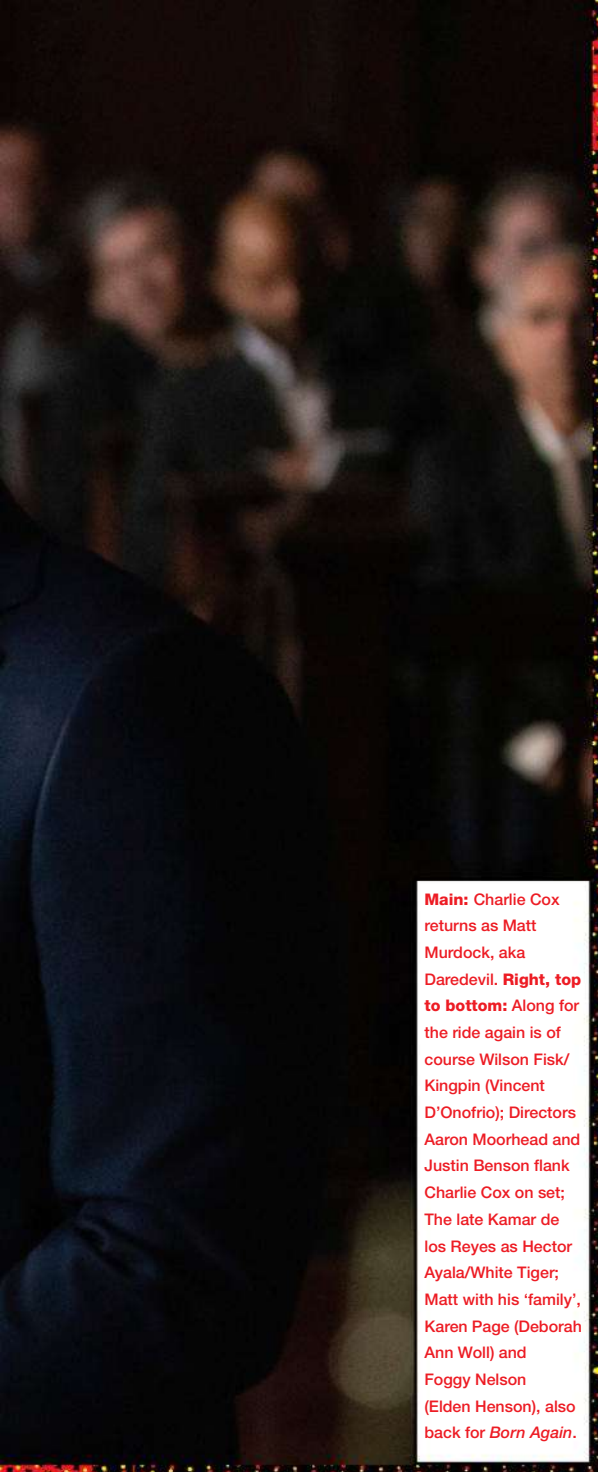
The epic rivalry between Cox's masked, blind vigilante and D'Onofrio's megalomaniacal, omelette-loving crime boss has been central to *Daredevil*'s success, ever since it arrived in 2015 and took superhero TV into edgier terrain. D'Onofrio's right to describe Fisk and Murdock as nocturnal creatures. They are two sides of the same coin, one relentless in his quest for justice and the other in his quest for power, both inevitably drawn to darkness in the end.

One of the earliest Marvel TV ventures, though produced separately from the MCU by Netflix, *Daredevil* delivered three seasons that were dark, violent, deeply character-driven, and perfectly cast. "We got Vincent D'Onofrio playing Kingpin in our lives!" exclaims Justin Benson, co-director of several *Born Again* episodes. "We got it! We're living through it!"

We were! Until 2018, when *Daredevil* was unexpectedly cancelled. "It was all very sudden and shocking," recalls Cox now. But, in 2021, it seemed there was life in the old devil yet when Marvel Studios' Kevin Feige teased that if Daredevil were to appear in the MCU, it would be Cox playing him. Cue cameos as Peter Parker's brick-catching lawyer in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and Jennifer Walters' one-night-stand in *She-Hulk*. Cox's Murdock officially became MCU canon. But there's only so much fun Matt Murdock can have defending web-slingers and exchanging flirty banter — only so much daylight. The darkness was calling.

In July 2022, it was announced Daredevil would be fully reborn, given his own series with *Born Again*. As it turns out, he'd end up being reborn more than once.

NETFLIX'S *DAREDEVIL* WASN'T AN ORIGIN story as such — when it began, Matt's violent moonlight pursuit was already well ingrained



Main: Charlie Cox returns as Matt Murdock, aka Daredevil. **Right, top to bottom:** Along for the ride again is of course Wilson Fisk/Kingpin (Vincent D'Onofrio); Directors Aaron Moorhead and Justin Benson flank Charlie Cox on set; The late Kamar de los Reyes as Hector Ayala/White Tiger; Matt with his 'family', Karen Page (Deborah Ann Woll) and Foggy Nelson (Elden Henson), also back for *Born Again*.

— but it did tell us how he got that way. The son of a boxer who was killed when Matt was young, he lost his sight at nine years old in a car crash involving a chemical spill, which enhanced his other senses to a superhuman level. The series sets up his ongoing battle with Fisk over all three seasons, with Matt exposing his criminality, sending him to prison (twice), and punching him many, many times. It also introduces us to the closest thing Matt has to family: university friend and legal partner Franklin 'Foggy' Nelson (Elden Henson), and client-turned-romantic-interest-turned-colleague Karen Page (Deborah Ann Woll).

Daredevil set a new bar for small-screen superheroes, with its sinister tone, evocative world-building, endlessly complex characters and astoundingly ambitious action sequences — an 11-minute-long take where Matt fights his way out of prison, Matt and Wilson Bethel's troubled FBI agent Bullseye going hand to hand in the *New York Bulletin* office, and an iconic, brutal hallway oner, to name but a few. With *Born Again*, Marvel aims to recapture all of that — but it wasn't always going to be that way.

In October 2023, news broke that *Born Again* was undergoing a major creative overhaul. With six of the planned 18 episodes shot, the Hollywood writers' strike allowed Marvel to see the progress thus far and reevaluate. As a result, that 18-episode run was split into two nine-episode seasons, and head writers Chris Ord and Matt Corman were released from the show, with *Daredevil* spin-off *The Punisher* writer and producer Dario Scardapane brought on board.

"The strikes landed, [Marvel] looked at everything with a 30,000-foot eye, and were like, 'This isn't the show it wants to be,'" Scardapane says. "What they'd gone for was totally cool, but missing a certain *Daredevil* DNA. So when the strike ended, I got a call." The initial vision for *Born Again* had been to create more of "a straight-ahead legal procedural," the showrunner explains, "mixed in with the dilemmas of Matt Murdock. Daredevil was almost an ingredient. It was much less the world we knew, and more trying to blaze a new trail — but in doing so, they'd forgotten some things that really were necessary to the engine of the story." Although some of the footage already shot would be incorporated, Scardapane was one of several who pitched ideas for the new direction of the show, with his core vision being to bring back those necessary elements from the original series. "There were plot points and moments and people and feelings missing," he explains. "If you put them in, everything laid out perfectly." It was a case of better the *Daredevil* you know, it seems.

Those missing people were Woll and Henson, who are back for *Born Again* alongside Jon Bernthal (as Frank Castle, aka The Punisher) and Bethel's Bullseye. They weren't originally part of the plan, instead reintroduced as a major part of Scardapane's pitch. "That was actually one of the first things I said to the bosses," the showrunner explains. "You can't do this show without Karen and Foggy. They're Matt's family. They're the heart of his world. You can't take them out without explaining why, and if that explanation doesn't ring true, don't take them out." Their return was a hill Scardapane was happy to die on. "I was willing to lose a job over this one," he laughs. "Because Season 3 of the Netflix show ended with a dream, with the names on that napkin (*which read 'Nelson Murdock & Page', hinting at the trio coming together to form a new firm*). If you don't pay that off, you're not giving your characters context. You can't ignore that dream."

Scardapane wasn't the only new blood recruited to revamp *Born Again*: this is also when directing duo Benson and Moorhead were hired to helm the new episodes. Known for low-budget indie movies like *Something In The Dirt* and *Synchronic*, the pair have also become MCU small-screen regulars, working on *Moon Knight* and *Loki* Season 2. "I think this was our first show where we came in and fully had our footing?" Benson asks his co-director. "I'd say so," Moorhead replies. "Because even with *Loki*, there's no way not to be thrown in the deep end, because you're building an entire world. This one felt immediately accessible to us, because the stakes are extremely primal and graspable. There are two men, in opposition to each other, that couldn't be more different."

While the grounded, gritty setting of *Daredevil* might feel a long way away from Benson and Moorhead's usual mind-bending sci-fi affairs, for the directors it's the most at home they've felt in the MCU so far. "Our indie films are extremely naturalistic, and tend to exist in a world where if a human falls down, it's going to hurt," Benson explains. "In that way, this show's a much better match for us than any other superhero project we've done." Moorhead agrees. "It was like a glove," he says. "Once we ›

all got into a room together, we realised that this is a huge task, but it's gonna work." *Born Again* was ready to be born again. And so was the conflict between Daredevil and Kingpin.

VAMPIRES IN THE DAYLIGHT. *DAREDEVIL*'S core concern has long been the push and pull between the shadowy figures of Murdock and Fisk: two iconic characters, both trying to 'save' Hell's Kitchen, but through very different methods. Kingpin's is developing organised-crime networks that keep the city's underbelly under his control, and Matt's is taking down those networks by popping on a horned mask and handing the henchmen of New York their asses. It's fair to say that they don't often see eye to eye.

But in *Born Again*, with Fisk running for New York Mayor and Matt trying to balance his two identities, a fragile truce is declared between them, in an effort to reduce the impact of their hatred for one another on the city. It's an unlikely change of direction for the pair from Scardapane. "The battle of Kingpin and Daredevil had become static," he explains. "If you look at how it ends almost every season, they punch the shit out of each other, Kingpin goes to jail, we know he's gonna come back. I didn't want to do that. This dynamic is way more tense. There's one scene between them in the first episode that lays it all out. Then we spend the next eight episodes throwing rocks at it."

For D'Onofrio, this new alliance is a chance to stretch the same character he built from the ground up back in 2015. "When I was coming up with how I was going to play this iconic character for Marvel, I wanted to baseline the performance with a real man, and not a cartoon," he says. "I had to come up with a posture and a voice. Now, I'm bringing that initial creation and letting the scripts take it further. The thing about him is, he's never not broken. He's always a broken man. He hides it. He'll do anything to be perceived as and to actually have the power of someone that could not be broken. But he is." They both are, Fisk and Murdock — and it's the murky co-dependency their enmity creates that Scardapane wanted to dig into. "These people are inextricably linked," he says. "That link is violent and toxic and scary and bleeds over into their lives. They define each other. We did a version of that I haven't seen before."

Speaking of violent and scary — steel your stomachs for a sadistic new supervillain. *Born Again* will see comic-book antagonist Muse, a serial killer who creates gruesome graffiti from the remains of his victims, make his screen debut. His powers include superhuman strength and speed and a body that acts like a vortex,

Main: A tense conversation for Michael Gandolfini (Daniel Blake), Zabryna Guevera (Sheila Rivera) and Fisk. **Right, top to bottom:** Deadly vigilante Frank Castle/The Punisher (Jon Bernthal); Sinister newbie Muse, played by an as-yet unconfirmed actor; Getting creative; Matt rocking the work clothes.

sucking in sensory information — making him a particularly tough match for Daredevil, whose abilities rely on his heightened senses. "I remember reading the comics where Muse shows up, and being very chilled by that whole storyline," recalls Cox.

A new, less terrifying character is White Tiger — aka Hector Ayala, a martial-arts master who gains his powers from magical Jade Tiger amulets. Played by Kamar de los Reyes, who sadly passed away after filming, he's another costumed crime-fighter running around Hell's Kitchen, trying to take down bad guys. But Ayala ends up in prison, on trial, and in need of a *really* good lawyer. "That storyline is so poignant for Matt Murdock and his world," Cox says. "Because he's having to defend someone who does what he does without revealing to the world that coincidence." Fighting Ayala's case gets Matt questioning what being a hero means, what Daredevil represents, and whether the catastrophe the mask can bring is really worth it. "Matt comes face to face, in a pretty harsh way, with the consequences of being Daredevil," Scardapane teases. "The mask he's wearing in our show isn't Daredevil. The mask may be Matt Murdock. That conflict: how do you put away the alter-ego that actually may be who you are? Charlie did an amazing job of that."

A tortured hero? Check. A horrifying villain? Check. So far, so *Daredevil*. But for anyone worried that a new iteration of the man in red under the Disney-owned, Marvel Studios banner might mean a sanding down of the original's rougher edges, *Empire* is assured that is definitely not the case. "The level of violence is way up there for a Marvel/Disney show," Scardapane states. "I don't think there's anything else even in the ballpark. There's a moment in this that is just absolutely batshit, and way past anything Netflix ever did." Given the first season saw Kingpin behead someone with a car door, that's quite a statement — but Cox agrees. "They've not been shy in pushing those boundaries," he says. And in D'Onofrio's eyes, *Born Again* is a clear follow-up to the Netflix version. "There's a world in which you might think that if that show kept running, we'd be in this place eventually, or something like it," he says. "But we've gone further in the darkness, the action, the nastiness." All hell is about to break loose in Hell's Kitchen.

THOUGH THE FIRST SEASON OF *BORN Again* is yet to drop, the team is already shooting the second. "Season 2's a blast, because we're not shackled by any previously shot footage," Scardapane says. "We're swinging for the fences. It's on par with huge Greek epics, lots of big themes. Unless you dig really deep into the books, the place that Kingpin and Daredevil wind up at the end of Season 2 is unfathomable, given where they've been." He hints there could be scope for more of the crimson-spectacled hero beyond that, too: "Making a story that can endure and has legs, that was calculated."

And after guest spots in *No Way Home*, *She-Hulk*, *Echo* and *Hawkeye*, is there any chance of seeing Matt Murdock or Wilson Fisk elsewhere in the MCU in the future? "I've had to lie in the past," Cox laughs. "But right now, I don't have to. They have not told me about anything else. My mum sends me rumours, because she gets excited about it, and I have to tell her they're just rumours." Both are up for reprising their roles, though. "As long as they'll have me, I'm here to play," says D'Onofrio. "It's lovely to feel like there's always the possibility something might happen," says Cox. "*Spider-Man* was one of the great experiences of playing this character. I live in hope."

Even if no further MCU appearances materialise, it's clear the chance to continue Daredevil's story in *Born Again* means a lot to the people making it. For Benson and Moorhead, working on this feels like kismet. "I learned about Daredevil from a kid in the playground when I was in third grade," Benson recalls. "It's one of those things where you wonder whether we're living in a simulation or not, these weird coincidences in the way your life works out."

For Scardapane, the reason the horned hell-raiser is beloved by so many is clear. "He is, without a doubt, one of the most vulnerable superheroes," he says. "You imagine what it's like to be deprived of a major sense, and there's this wariness of the world based on what's happened to him. That's what makes it interesting. So many characters, even DC characters like Batman, are ahead of the game, have all the information, make a plan and then that plan works out. Daredevil is the antithesis of that." That may be true, but in taking over *Born Again*, Scardapane absolutely has a plan. Darkness awaits.

***DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN* IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 5 MARCH**

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In Gints Zilbalodis' **FLOW**, a cat travels through a flooded, hazardous, post-human landscape, putting those feline survival skills to good use. Here, the Latvian director recounts the nine stages of his own unique filmmaking journey

AS TOLD TO **IAN FREER**

Above, top to bottom: The cat just about keeps afloat; A fascinating object catches the lemur's eye. **Right:** Setting sail. **Below, top to bottom:** The capybara and cat forge a tentative camaraderie; The secretary bird and the golden retriever find their sea legs.

1 EMBARKING

I think my personality is like a cat.

I want to be independent and do things my own way. After making my first feature, *Away* [2019, about a boy being chased by a monster], I had an opportunity to work on a bigger scale and so thought I should make a story about me figuring out how to collaborate. It wasn't something I had past experience with; it was something I was going through in that moment.

When I was 15 I made a simple, seven-minute, hand-drawn short, *Aqua*, about a cat's fear of water. When I decided to revisit this premise for a feature version, I wanted to focus more on the cat's fear of others, of relationships. *Flow* is the first time I've worked with a team. I just thought a cat would be the perfect protagonist for a story of starting out alone, then learning how to work together.

The cat learns to trust others, but I didn't want to have a simple arc where it learns lessons and everything is solved. I wanted to show that, even though it overcomes some of these fears and becomes braver, it still has these anxieties. It learns to accept them and live with them, but I was looking for something that felt more like real life: you do learn things, but, in some ways, you stay the same as well.

2 ASSEMBLING

The hero cat is based on two cats. The first one — who *Aqua* is also based on — is a cat I had in high school called Josephine. She was a stray when we found her, and for that reason, she kept her guard up. I guess the cat in the film has similar trust issues.

Josephine had very fluffy fur but that is very hard to animate and render so we didn't use that. I had a second cat, Oigars (*pronounced Oy-gash*), who was Josephine's son. He was a lot more trusting, almost like a dog in some ways, very friendly, but we only had him for a year. It was a very sad moment when he passed away, which was the inspiration for this impending doom, this cataclysmic flood that washes everything away and forces the cat to take refuge on a battered sailboat. Visually, Oigars looked more like the cat in our story.

The cat befriends a number of animals on the boat: a golden retriever (based on my two dogs, Tiger and Audrey), a capybara, a South African secretary bird and a lemur. While writing the script, it was like a casting process, looking at different animals and imagining their chemistry if you put them together. It also highlights one of the film's key themes: the desire to find a group who accepts you for who you are.

3 FLOODING

The cat's fear of water feels very universal; you don't need to explain to anyone why cats don't like water. To bring out this fear in a very scary way, I thought it should be a flood.

I don't know exactly where the humans went or where the flood is coming from because

the cat doesn't know these things. I wanted to stay in the cat's point of view. So you start with this emotional feeling, and then reverse-engineer it and figure out the logic for these places to be there. I want to focus on things that I feel are important, which are the characters and their relationships. I don't want to waste time on lore or exposition.

I understand these images evoke ideas around climate change but I didn't want to preach a didactic message. My feeling is if you show some bleak documentary about natural disasters, maybe it would only be seen by a small audience and by people who already care about these issues. But if there's this fun escapade with cute animals, it can actually reach a bigger audience and may have a bigger impact. Sometimes I feel you can find a truth more through fiction than non-fiction.

4 BUILDING

There are no humans in *Flow*. And no dialogue. Journalists often ask me, "Is it difficult to make a film with no dialogue?" It is difficult, but I think it's actually tougher to tell stories *with* dialogue. I tend to think of visuals first — it feels more natural to me. Without characters speaking, I can be more expressive with all the other tools of cinema. I'm forced to come up with an original way of telling the story. I can't just have them speak about it. I have to use the environment, the camera, music and sound to convey all these feelings.

On their journey through the flood, our animals see half-submerged ancient temples, but also maybe newer-looking buildings from the early 20th century. I wanted it to feel timeless, so there are no big, glass skyscrapers — hopefully it will still feel fresh many years from now. We're making an alternative version of our world. Of course, we were studying real places and combining them to make something new. But I wanted it to have this sense of wonder — we see the city is being flooded and these fish swimming underwater in the streets — which means we're seeing these things for the first time, and we feel curiosity about them, just like the cat does. It really helps us get into its mindset.

5 DESIGNING

I didn't do a lot of concept art for the main characters. I would just model them directly in 3D. I deliberately didn't want to have too much detail, because you might lose some of the expressiveness and appeal if you made it too hyper-real, as some other animated films do. I wanted it to feel handmade, with these brush strokes and these imperfections. I describe our approach as naturalism rather than realism. The difference is we are studying real life, referencing it, but we're not copying it. We're interpreting real life and telling a story.

I wanted to do a lot of long takes where the camera is very close, following the characters. It has this handheld movement as if a real person is operating and reacting to things, and not able to catch everything perfectly. I didn't do any storyboards because this approach is really hard to draw, because of all the perspective changes. There are two shots that are each around five minutes long, and the camera is moving through the environment. Because the camera is very ›

close to the ground and we see the grass and all the detail really up close, it had to be incredibly detailed. Some of those scenes got really heavy and our computers struggled to render all that.

6 FLOWING

It's often said filmmakers should never work with animals and water — at least our movie doesn't have kids! The water in *Flow* is a storytelling technique. At first, when the cat is afraid of others, the water is also very scary and aggressive. Later, as the cat and the other animals come together, the water becomes more tranquil and peaceful. Water can be a metaphor, a very expressive way to communicate the cat's internal fears. But water is so hard to control, even in animation, where you can control everything. You have to understand the physics to be able to master it. I can't really do that, but luckily, I had people who can.

Usually on animated films, there's a big team designing all these water effects, but in our case, it was just two people. We had to develop new tools to do this. There's no one way of rendering water. It could be a small puddle, a river or a lake or a stormy sea — each of these needs a different technique and a different system. What is really tricky is to have the camera going in and out of the water within the same shot. The water was one of the first things we started working on, and one of the last things we finished before the premiere. I think I'll avoid water in the next film.

7 LISTENING

I didn't actually study music and I don't play any instruments, but I write these simple, minimalistic themes on my laptop, which can feel more evocative. I write the music as I am writing the script because I don't want it to feel like an afterthought. I'm not thinking about specific scenes for most of the time, I'm just playing and making discoveries. I created a lot of material — seven hours of music — but we ended up using only 50 minutes. So, when I'm designing the shots, I can choose multiple options.

Writing the music also gives me ideas for scenes. There's this climactic scene with the cat and the bird up in the sky. This was really inspired by music, because I knew they would be going there, but I couldn't actually figure out what would happen. I had found this piece of music that felt both triumphant, but also melancholic, creating a bittersweet emotion. I felt like I could express these feelings more with music, even if I couldn't even articulate them at first.

Later we brought in Rihards Zaļupe, a more experienced composer, and re-recorded most of the score with real instruments and an orchestra. If I used a piece of music to introduce the cat or the dogs, he would take these motifs and intertwine them in other scenes so it is more coherent, and these themes come back in to add multiple layers. It was one of my favourite processes. Music is so fast compared to animation; you get an immediate emotion, but it's so strong as well.

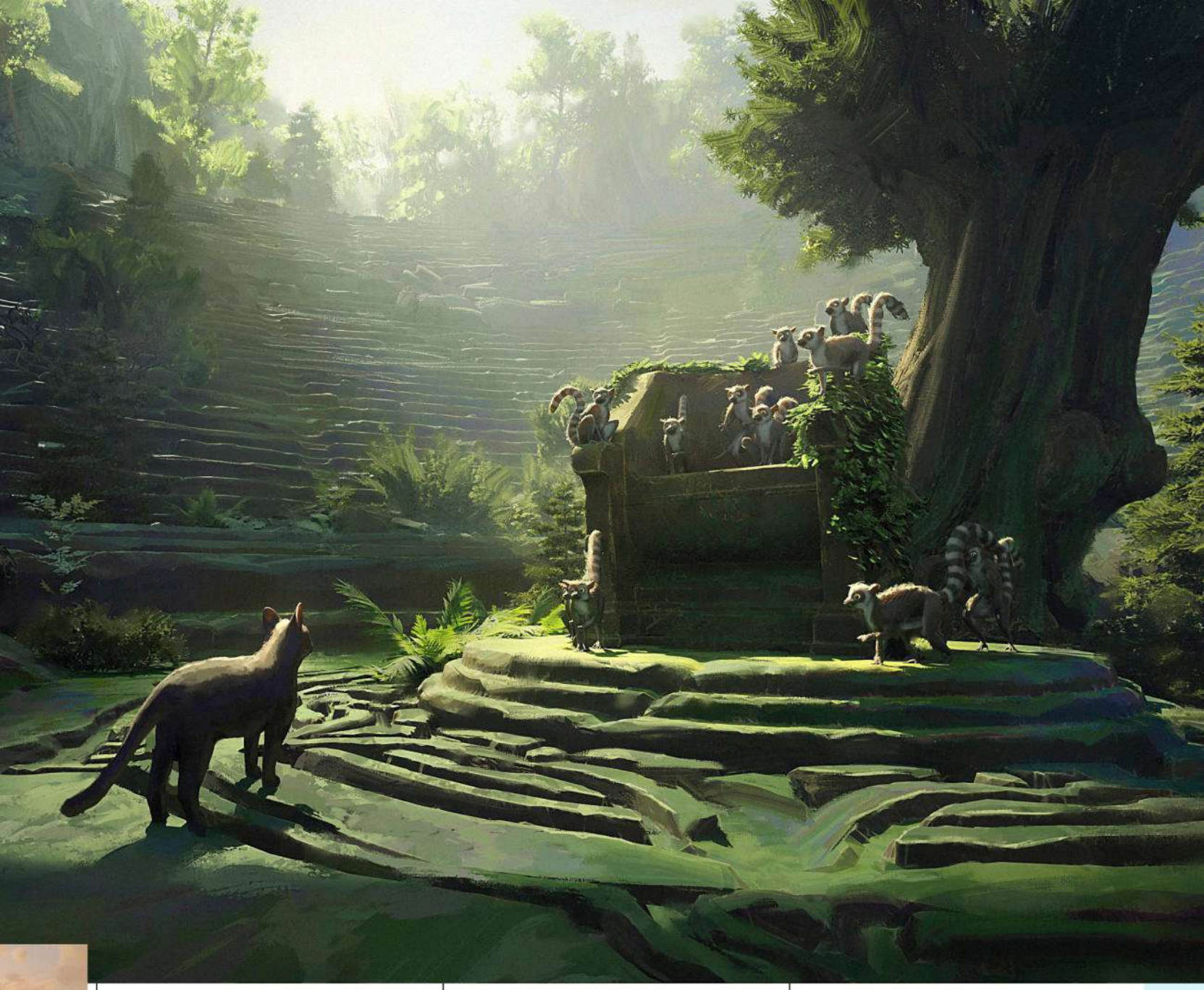
There are also long scenes with no music. I thought sound designer Gurwal [Coïc-Gallas] would be excited to have this opportunity, but he was actually quite anxious to have this responsibility. He couldn't hide behind the dialogue or music. For the voices, we didn't want to use humans mimicking animals, because then it would feel too cartoony. What I found interesting, and which I didn't know before, is that cats have different types of voices; you can't just mix and match them. Gurwal recorded his own cat. Gurwal's cat is usually quite chatty, always meowing. But when he pointed a microphone at it, it shut up. He had to hide microphones all over his house and record it secretly. I was pleased I was not the only one who struggles with dialogue.

8 BELIEVING

I have been working on *Flow* for five-and-a-half years. It's been intense. The budget is small [€3.5 million], 50 times smaller than a Disney film, but even compared to some independent European films, it's tight. People always ask if animators are patient, but I feel like you're always in a rush. You are running a marathon at a sprint pace. I could just keep going and improve the film, but sometimes you need to have the deadline just to move on. It didn't feel like a long time. It felt like we just barely made it.

There were times where I felt like I'd bitten off more than I could chew. During the writing, I wasn't sure if people would understand the story, if the ending is clear, or if it got across what I intended. I had never worked as an animator as an employee and now I was in charge of a team. I felt the director should know what they want, and be able to express these ideas clearly. I felt this imposter syndrome because I actually didn't know what I wanted, but I realised that most directors probably don't know initially what they want. You have to put the work in — that's the lesson I learned. I had doubts throughout this process, and only when we had the music and the animation and the lighting, and everything came together, did I feel confident that it worked.

Above and bottom far right: Concept art of the secretary bird and the lemur. **Right:** The cat encounters a troop of lemurs. **Below:** Writer-director Gints Zilbalodis with his Golden Globe for Best Animated Feature. **Bottom:** A whale-like cetacean plays a quietly key role.



9 ENJOYING

The film premiered at Cannes, which was really special because they very rarely select animated films. It's great that these boundaries between animation and other types of films seem to be blurring, as they should be, because we're all telling stories; it doesn't matter what tools you're using. Many of our team were there for the premiere, so it was quite an emotional screening. We had never watched the finished film with an audience before, only with the team itself, who are not the most objective viewers. It was such a relief that people were laughing at the right moments, and feeling the emotion in the right moments.

To go from sitting behind my desk animating this film to meeting hundreds and hundreds of people was really exciting, but also a big change in my lifestyle. And I'm incredibly honoured to have received BAFTA and Academy Award nominations. This is the first time that a film from Latvia has received either, which makes many of us here very proud.

Because it's not hyper-real animation and there are gaps in detail in terms of the visuals, I think the audience can project their own experiences onto the film. They see their own pets in this story and they also see their own fears. We are looking to relate to characters, we're looking to see ourselves on the screen and to experience it in a cinema, with a group of strangers that make you feel less alone.

I made *Aqua* when I was 15, and now I'm 30, so I have been thinking about this cat's story for half of my life. I spent a lot of time figuring out the plot, but it's really about the experience and the emotion. You only get that sense when you actually pay attention. And if you do, I think you will be rewarded with an escape from your reality for an hour-and-a-half. You go on this journey and feel what it's like to be a cat. I think that's what's amazing about films — you can experience life from different points of view and feel what it's like to live them. Hopefully Josephine would approve.

FLOW **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 MARCH**

WISE

GUYS

FOR DECADES, ROBERT DE NIRO AND THE MEN BEHIND MAFIA DRAMA **THE ALTO KNIGHTS** HAVE MADE LEGENDARY FILMS TOGETHER. NOW, WITH THE ACTOR TAKING BOTH LEAD ROLES, HE AND THE TEAM DISCUSS HISTORY AND LEGACY

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

"YOU KNOW WHAT? I'LL TELL YOU A STORY."

Irwin Winkler has a lot of stories. To some extent because he's 93. That'll rack up some tales. But so will being a legendary Hollywood producer, who started in 1967 with Elvis Presley's *Double Trouble*, then brought us *Point Blank*, *Rocky*, *Raging Bull*, *GoodFellas*, *The Wolf Of Wall Street*, *Creed*... Yes, he has stories. His latest film is Barry Levinson's Mob drama *The Alto Knights*, starring Robert De Niro, twice (more on that later), and *Empire* has just asked Winkler how hands-on the actor is. So, here's a story.

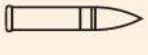
"Back in 1971, I was doing a movie called *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight*," he says of James Goldstone's gangster comedy. "Al Pacino was the leading actor, and I got a call from his agent. We were in rehearsal, three weeks from shooting, and the agent said to me, 'Al is not going to do your movie. He's going to do *The Godfather* instead.' So I said, 'Oh, really?', and we sued him and all that, and I was looking around for an actor to replace him." Winkler had liked De Niro in a couple of Brian De Palma films, and hired the 27-year-old up-and-comer to play small-time thief Mario Trantino. "And he came to me and said, 'You know, Irwin, I'd like to go to Italy for three or four days to research this character, to find out who he is, where he comes from, how he lived.' I said, 'Look, Bob, that's very nice, but I don't have a budget to send you to Italy for a week.' He said, 'That's okay, I'll pay for it myself.' He spent his own money. And he came back with all the hand props, the costumes and everything. That's Bob De Niro."

Winkler has worked with De Niro many times, and *The Alto Knights* marks the producer's third collaboration with screenwriter Nicholas Pileggi (after *GoodFellas*, which Pileggi co-wrote with Martin Scorsese, and *The Irishman*, on which he did some uncredited writing). The blood runs deep. For the Manhattan-set *The Alto Knights*, De Niro was the first person Winkler thought of to play real-life Mafia boss Frank Costello, and the first person he thought of to play real-life Mafia boss Vito Genovese (again, more later). The gangsters had grown up together, then ran an empire together, but after Genovese went to lay low in Italy in 1937 and got stuck there for years because of World War II, things changed.

"Genovese was avoiding being taken by the authorities because of two murders that he supposedly had something to do with," explains De Niro. "He wanted Costello to run everything for him until he got back. And then he came back, and he was upset because things were being run very smoothly, and he wanted more than what he was getting." The growing power imbalance and differing approaches to criminality made them bitter rivals. "You know, it's all kind of classic stuff," he continues.

But really, the team was the thing. "It was Nick Pileggi," De Niro says of the draw. "I've known Nick for so long, and he's great (*As well as* GoodFellas, *Pileggi co-wrote* Casino). And Barry, of course, we've worked quite a few times together (*on* Sleepers *and* Wag The Dog*, among others*). And Irwin, who's directed me in movies too, besides being a producer. So everybody I felt very comfortable with. It's then just a matter of the thing being good."

And as the four of them went to work, many stories were told. Including some of their own.



WINKLER HAD BEEN TRYING TO MAKE a film about this back in the early 1970s. "I grew up in New York, and I always heard about Frank Costello," he says of the man who was known as the Prime Minister of the underworld due to how effectively he influenced (read: corrupted) politicians and judges. "He was a fascinating man. I always thought we could get a good movie about it, and we tried, but never could get it right." Back then, he had Michael Cimino, who was just embarking on his directorial career, working on the screenplay. What happened? "It wasn't great, frankly," says Winkler, and he let it

Clockwise from top left: Crime boss Frank Costello (Robert De Niro); Fellow crime boss Vito Genovese (also De Niro); Bobbie Costello (Debra Messing) is in the crossfire; De Niro with director Barry Levinson on set.

go, until about a decade ago, when he and Pileggi began informally talking about Costello.

"Nick knows more about the Mafia and New York and gangsters than probably anybody else living," says Winkler. He may well be right; from the 1950s through to the 1980s, the 92-year-old says he "wound up writing an awful lot about it", for the Associated Press in NYC and *New York* magazine. "I wrote about a lot of city politics. I wrote about corruption in New York." He wrote the 1985 book *Wiseguy: Life In A Mafia Family*, about Henry Hill, that he and Scorsese would adapt for *GoodFellas*, and then 1995's *Casino: Love And Honor In Las Vegas*, which spawned *Casino*. A substantial cinematic take on Costello, says Pileggi, "was just sitting there. He was the one guy that came out of that gangster world who almost got to be legitimate. It's a great story."

They then needed a director. "Whose idea was it to hire Barry?" *Empire* asks Winkler of Levinson. "It was Barry's idea to hire Barry," laughs the producer. Levinson, who's been friends with Winkler for years, corroborates this; he'd heard about the script and asked to see it. "There were a number of things about Costello that I thought were very interesting, in terms of him as a character and the way that he saw the evolution of the Mafia," says the director (who in 1991 gave us Mob drama *Bugsy*, featuring Carmine Caridi as Costello and Don Carrara as Genovese). "He had a real business sense of how to handle things." Levinson, though, was also intrigued by Pileggi's inclusion of Genovese. And as he and Pileggi discussed him too, it became a two-hander about, says Levinson, "how best friends became worst enemies". During the 1950s, as Costello attempted to legitimise himself, Genovese moved his side of the business into drug smuggling. Costello wanted to "cleanse himself of the gangster ways, and his boyhood friend just liked being a gangster", laughs Pileggi.

De Niro connects the dots here to a fictional crime family. The one in that film Pacino jumped ship for back in 1971. "The characters [in *The Alto Knights*] are two classic Mafia bosses, and the stories that emanated from Costello and Genovese are, the way I understand it, connected to other stories. The basic line ›

about the drugs, that theme is in *The Godfather*: who wanted to go in this direction, who wanted to go in that direction... and if you didn't go in that [drugs] direction, then you're going to be a target."

It's true, says Pileggi, who recounts a lengthy story about the origins of it all. "I knew Mario Puzo when he was writing *The Godfather*. Mario was a friend of mine, and we were having dinner at my mother and father's house..." Anyway, to cut a lengthy story short, that evening Puzo told the Pileggis about what he was working on. And Puzo, says Pileggi, had researched the testimony that mobster Joe Valachi, a Genovese crime family member, gave to the McClellan committee in 1963, which brought to light Costello's activities, and the Five Families structure of the Mafia, blowing the lid off much of it. "That's what Mario Puzo absorbed. He read everything, and out of that came the broth of *The Godfather*."

And as the broth of *The Alto Knights* began to bubble, there was only one actor who could play Costello. History — both among this team, and cinematically — suggested it.

ROBERT DE NIRO WANTS TO TELL US a story. "The way I first became aware of Nick [Pileggi] was... Many years ago, before we had shot *Mean Streets*, I read this article in *New York* magazine that Nick had written about Little Italy. And I thought, 'Jeez, he's really good, and he really knows what he's talking about.' It was the first article I'd ever read by someone about that neighbourhood, and it was terrific. And so I told Marty about him. I said, 'Marty, this guy, he's really, really good. You gotta read the article,' and he must have done that. And then, oddly enough, I was walking up Broadway one day and saw him — I somehow must have remembered a picture of him in the magazine, and introduced myself. I told him it was a terrific article."

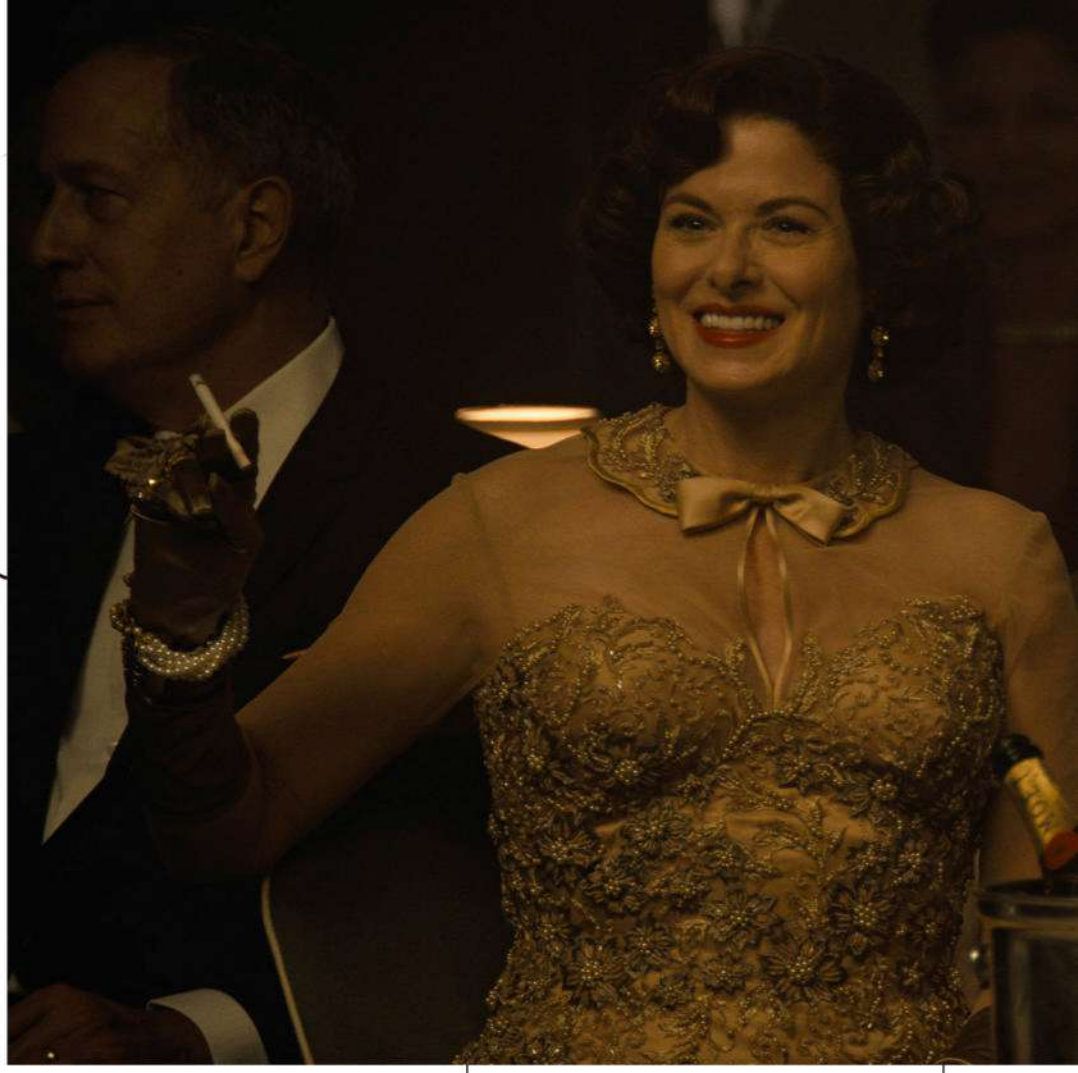
Does Pileggi remember that? Can he possibly?

"Yeah, oh absolutely," he says. "My memory is that he wanted me to come downtown and meet Marty Scorsese, because they were working on *Mean Streets*, or thinking about it, and everything I had been writing in *New York* magazine was on a similar subject. But I was just thinking he was a nice guy, and I didn't have time, I was working on my own stuff. So I never got down there." Later in the early '70s, he and De Niro would bump into each other at parties, and once met up at Dunkin' Donuts on Broadway: "Can you imagine going into a Dunkin' Donuts with Bob De Niro?"

So, Pileggi didn't get to meet Scorsese... until he wrote *Wiseguy*. Early on, the director called him to his apartment to discuss *GoodFellas*. There, Scorsese told Pileggi that De Niro was on board to play gangster Jimmy Burke (rechristened Jimmy Conway for the film), and that he was coming over shortly. "So I was in Marty's apartment, and in comes De Niro. And De Niro looks at me, and he says, 'Do you remember me?' And I said, 'I remember you.' And then he turned to Marty, and he said, 'You see, I told you we should have called him,' referring back to *Mean Streets*. And Marty said, 'Ah, the hell with it. Better late than never,' and we all hugged and started to make *GoodFellas*." (Pileggi, by the way, saw *Mean Streets* when it came out in 1973, and loved it. "I thought, 'Holy smokes!' I had grown up in that world, I knew that. It was so authentic. To me, it was a documentary.")

Little Italy loomed large over *The Alto Knights*; the title refers to the real former social club on Mulberry Street where, as younger men, Costello, Genovese and their cohorts would congregate. When De Niro first read an early draft in 2021 (then called 'Wiseguys') he was especially interested in the club. "He asked a lot about it," says Winkler. "Because when he was growing up, he hung around the Alto Knights social club. So it was very close to him. And at that point, he said to me, 'Okay, yeah, I'd like to play Costello.'"

De Niro asked Pileggi what he knew about the long-gone club. "When we got together, he had a copy of my script and he had notes all over it," says the writer. "And that's when he told me that he had grown up in that club. He had spent two or three years of his life hanging out there. He has pictures of himself at 16 with some of those guys hanging around the club. There were a *lot* of gangsters in that club, obviously. And I think it gave him an insight into that world and into those men, their characteristics and the way they act that has carried him through as an actor when he does those kinds of parts. He just



Above: Bobbie and Frank have a night out. **Left:** Costello takes his dogs (in fact De Niro's own dogs) out for a walk. **Far left, top to bottom:** De Niro with Ray Liotta in 1990's *GoodFellas*; *Casino* (1995); As Mario in *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight* (1971).

Alamy

knows it. He watched it as a kid from that club."

The idea of De Niro playing both Costello and Genovese was suggested to De Niro about one second after Winkler had come up with it. "He said, 'Who do you think would be right to play Vito Genovese?'" remembers the producer. "And I thought about it for a couple of beats, and I couldn't think of anybody better than him. I said, 'You know what, *you* should play both parts.' It was really that spontaneous."

"I said, 'Let me think about that for a while,'" recalls De Niro. "The idea of playing the two different characters was intriguing to me." And the more he thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense. "They're like two different sides of the same coin," he continues. "So that's interesting. One is more rational, more diplomatic. That's the Costello character. The Genovese character is more erratic, more impulsive." Levinson agrees. "That notion came about when we thought about it, in the sense that as kids, they were very much the same," he says. "And then comes that split. Two guys were almost one, then they suddenly not only divide, but ultimately become enemies."

Then came the practicalities. "It was a lot of work, the scenes between me and myself," says De Niro of the Cincinnati shoot in late 2022. "I would joke about it, you know, 'I'm gonna do something with myself now.'" Also, though, he ended up bringing more of himself to the film than anybody had expected.

DESPITE THE PRECISION OF PILEGGI'S screenplays, he welcomes deviation. "Script is dead," he says. He swoons remembering how Scorsese constructed *GoodFellas*' iconic one-shot of Henry Hill leading Karen through the Copacabana: "That was two sentences in the book. It was Marty." And on *The Alto Knights*, De Niro kept bringing ideas.

"Barry is easy, loose," De Niro says of Levinson. "He likes improvisation. We had a very clear script, but certain scenes we worked on a lot, to make sure they furthered the story, but also that they had a certain life to them, and hopefully authenticity." And to do that, De Niro blurred some boundaries. For instance, it was decided that Costello should have some dogs, and as Levinson remembers, "Bob said, 'You know, I got a few dogs. Maybe we should use *them*, because they know me. The little ones.'" And then he also suggested that his dogs have little mink stoles to keep them warm. And so, Robert De Niro's little dogs are in *The Alto Knights*, at one point wearing mink stoles.

"It was absolutely improvised!" laughs Pileggi of that scene. "Bob has these two little Pomeranians, or Pekingese or whatever the hell they are. They're adorable dogs, so why not use them in the movie? I mean, the fact that you have a Mafia chief walking in the park with his two little dogs... it humanises your character."

And it wasn't just dogs. Both Costello and Genovese, as all self-respecting Mafia bosses do, have right-hand men, and to play them, De Niro suggested two of his old friends. Two old friends who used to frequent the Alto Knights club with him. "They're guys he grew up with," says Levinson. "He mentioned them and I said, 'I'll see them, I'll do some readings. And they were very good.'" So, they're in the film: some genuine Alto Knights clientele, back by De Niro's side again.

The Alto Knights became *The Alto Knights* after the shoot. At first it was called 'Costello', and then 'Wiseguys' before earning its final title, in part because of what the club meant to De Niro, but also, says Pileggi, "because we realised that it was this grandiose title for a bunch of thugs. And that club stays in their minds throughout, to the very end."

There is poetry, too, in this film being made by this group of people who have similarly been in each other's lives for decades. Winkler says De Niro has been his "friend for 50 years, and over the years, we went through a lot of stuff together, growing up in a way, and through marriages and divorces and children and highs and lows".

And how does it feel for De Niro, to have made Mob films with Winkler and Pileggi, let alone with others, for over half a century now? "With Nick and Barry and Irwin all having been involved in these types of movies before... why not?" he says. "I mean, it's fun to do if it comes from a real place."

So speaks an old Alto Knights regular.

***THE ALTO KNIGHTS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 MARCH**

David Lynch

1946 2025

Mind-bending movies. Nightmarish visions. And damn fine coffee. Cast, collaborators and more reflect on cinema's surrealist genius

JACOB BOLL

"He had other worlds inside of him"

Nicolas Cage on Wild At Heart

I WAS HAVING my first dinner with David Lynch and Laura Dern to discuss the possibility of *Wild At Heart*, and the Pan-Pacific Auditorium was burning down. It was literally on fire as we were talking about maybe doing this movie together. And he put all those fire elements in the movie, largely because of the effect of having this beloved Art Deco building burning next door to our dinner meeting.

David was a huge admirer of Federico Fellini, and I think that he is the American Fellini — he was able to create images that are enigmatic and yet informed emotionally. I had my own surrealistic dreams of what could I do with film performance. I was a big fan of what Andy Warhol had done with collage and iconic figures, which was antithetical to Stanislavski, who said, "Don't ever imitate." So I thought, "Well, I want to try imitating and see if we can do something." I walked into rehearsals

Clockwise from main: Lula (Laura Dern) and Sailor (Nicolas Cage); Smokin'; Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) threatens Lula; Sailor lies back and thinks of Elvis; The Good Witch (Sheryl Lee) visits Sailor; David Lynch chats to Harry Dean Stanton; Lynch on set with Cage and Dern.

with this snakeskin jacket, and I said, "I want to put this in the movie. I found it in a second-hand store. I want it to be like Brando in *The Fugitive Kind*, and I also want to talk like Elvis Presley in the movie." And he said, "Well, that's a great idea, Nickster!" He just totally went for it and actually wrote it into the script.

I said, "Hey, David, is it okay if I have fun while making this movie?" And he said, "Nickster, it's not only okay, it's necessary." At that time, I was doing pictures like *Birdie* with Alan Parker, and I was trying do the whole De Niro torture-myself thing, and David freed me from all that. He took that all away just by giving me the greenlight to have fun on his set and to enjoy it.

I remember Freddie Jones, the British actor who was in *The Elephant Man*, doing his scene: it was a monologue about pigeon poop, and David, who loved Freddie, couldn't stop laughing. He had to put a napkin over his mouth and nose to hide his laughter. And I don't know why but I just inexplicably said to David, "Well, are you going to speed his voice up?" Out of nowhere. And then I saw the movie, and that's exactly what he did: he sped up Freddie's voice. "*Pigeons!*" He's making these weird squawking sounds in a high-pitched *Alvin And The Chipmunks* voice. I was just joking around, but he did it!

I only saw him be fun on set. He could really keep his emotions, or his anger, so to speak, in check. He said to me, "You know, Nickster, when I was a teenager, my dad came into my room when I was in bed and you know, I don't like being called Dave, and he kept saying, 'Come on, Dave, wake up, Dave,' clapping his hands. 'It's time to go to school, Dave. Come on, Dave.' So, Nickster, I pulled off the covers, and I slugged him as hard as I could in the stomach." So I knew from that story that he had the ability to be edgy and have a temper.

One day, I had that horrific song 'Spinning Wheel' [by Blood, Sweat & Tears] stuck in my head. You know, "What goes up, must come down." We were in the Thunderbird convertible and I told David, and said, "I think I'm gonna sing it." And he went, "No, Nickster, don't do it. Do not sing that song." I got really close to doing it because I wanted to see what it would do, but he was like, "Nickster, goddammit, I'm telling you, don't do it!" I could tell that if I had done it, that he was gonna go way off the rails. So I didn't do it. He's in a zone, he's focusing, and one little thing like that might have put him over the edge.

He would do transcendental meditation at lunch in his trailer — there were certain things in the day that he needed to do to be able to be the director that he was, and keep the ship sailing in the right direction. So, as happy and as fun as it was, I could also tell that, to quote Walt Whitman, he had other worlds inside of him. He expressed them in his work. He got it all out in a very constructive way, as opposed to a destructive way. And I know what that's like myself, in my own work.

I was always mystified that I never worked with David again, because we had such a terrific time together. He had another novel that he was interested in [us doing] called *You Play The Black And The Red Comes Up* [Richard Hallas, 1938]. It was noir and edgy and cool, but that didn't happen. And then for a scene in [2022's] *The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent*, I was looking for a director that I had worked with who's also a great actor, and obviously David's both. We FaceTimed, he was in his house, and he said, "Well, Nickster, we got this virus out there," and I guess he didn't want to do it. Now, of course, I understand what was really going on. Emphysema was what took my grandfather, Bob Vogelsang, so I've been around that. But that was the last time I spoke to David.

I never had more fun working with anybody than I did with David Lynch. And I think *Wild At Heart* is one of the best movies I've ever made. I'll never be able to do another movie like that. He cannot be replaced. **AS TOLD TO ALEX GODFREY**

Alamy, Imago

"He made films on his own terms"

Dexter Fletcher on The Elephant Man

AUDITIONS WENT OUT for my character [Bytes' boy] in *The Elephant Man* at [Wembley's] Lee Studios, and I was the first kid in. I sat with David, just had a chat with him. And he didn't see anybody else after that, from what I was told. He just went, "This is the kid."

We shot it in 1979. At first, David always wore this big overcoat on set, and a big hat, kind of hiding away. Tony Hopkins [Dr Treves] said to him, "Come out from behind that hat and Crombie, we need to see you, we want to talk to you!" And he did. I think Tony said that not only for his own benefit, but for David's benefit as well, because it made him more accessible.

There's a really amazing shot in the film that opens with a dog and an old man walking up a cobblestone street, when Treves is first going to see John Merrick [John Hurt]. That was down in Wapping, and that old guy was a local guy who was literally just walking past with his arthritic old dog. And Lynch went, "Hey, man, do you want to be in the movie?" This old East End bloke was like, "What?" So it was, "Get him in a costume." And I was watching this, like, "This is amazing!" It adds authenticity and truth to the film.

I had my 14th birthday on set. It was my last day of filming, and they gave me a cake with an elephant on it. A sort of Disneyfied elephant, which was really weird. I don't know if that was David's idea or not, his idea of a joke. But it was this big, childish elephant. And I'd spent six weeks with John Hurt, who looked horrific.

But David spoke to me like an adult, and treated me as such. I don't think it made any difference to him that I was 13. When [1999's] *The Straight Story* played at the London Film Festival, I got a call from David's PA, who said, "He's having drinks at this hotel with as many of the cast and crew of *The Elephant Man* as he could find, come along." So I went along and there was David and John Hurt and Freddie Jones and Tony Hopkins, and Freddie Francis,

Main: John Hurt's John Merrick as public spectacle. **Above, top to bottom:** A night at the theatre; Hurt on set with Lynch; Lynch briefs his cast, including little Dexter Fletcher on the left; Fletcher as Bytes' boy.

Alamy, Brookfilms Ltd, Criterion Collection

the cinematographer, and we all had a drink. It was great! And then we went to the Odeon to watch *The Straight Story*. But the point is that he'd always treated me as much as one of the adult cast and crew as anyone else.

Sometime in the early '80s he sent me the script for 'Ronnie Rocket' with a note saying, "This is 'Ronnie Rocket'. Read it, learn it. We're going to do it." He wanted me to play Ronnie, this robot kid who this band find, and when they plug him into the mains he makes all these weird noises, and they start using him as an instrument in their band. It's sort of a detective story as well. But it never happened, and he went onto *Dune*.

He was thinking about me for *Dune*, for Paul Atreides, and he came to see me — I was at the Royal Shakespeare Company rehearsing *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*; I was playing Falstaff's page. We sat down in the coffee bar there, and I was chatting away and jumping around and being excitable. I think I was too young: I was only 16, and I looked about 13. Years later, he sent me *Mulholland Drive*. I was in LA and I went to see him at his house, to talk about playing the film director [Justin Theroux's Adam]. He started talking about that *Dune* episode, and I said, "Yeah, I was going through a bit of a time then," because I had my struggles with drugs and wayward behaviour. And he said, "Yeah, I could see you were struggling." That was astute of him. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed or cared.

David was one of the great auteurs of cinema. He made films on his own terms that are going to stand the test of time. And to be a small part of that, on and off over the 50 years of my career, is incredibly important to me. I don't take that lightly. **AS TOLD TO ALEX GODFREY**

Creating Snootworld

Screenwriter Caroline Thompson on a Lynch project that got away

I almost Googled, "How tall is David Lynch?" because I remembered him looming over me and wondered if that was accurate. Then I realised that the feeling had nothing to do with physical reality, so I decided not to ask my computer. The feeling of him looming over me was real, though.

It was 2002. I don't recall why David asked me to write an animated movie for him called 'Snootworld'. *Edward Scissorhands*? *The Nightmare Before Christmas*? My feisty agent? But there I was. The launching pad was the idea that as a Snoot (already a small creature) gets older, they get even smaller. At seven, they are at their tiniest and most vulnerable so they are sent away from home for their own protection until they turn eight. But, before he goes, our miniature hero falls out of his mother's anxious hands and tumbles into the deep nap of the carpet where he drops into a whole, magnificent, invisible world. An Oz journey.

The idea was wonderfully whackadoo — David was always the man behind the curtain, gaping below the surface to see what was truly there, wasn't he? 'Snootworld' definitely dove right in. And I did too.

Pretty immediately, though, word came that, even though David wouldn't be writing, he would be sharing screenplay credit. WTF? No, no, no. If you get credit, you have to write. So… David came up to hunker down with me for a few days at our table at the big ranch surrounded by oak forest where I lived back then.

My memories of the time we spent together are like little floating bits of dandelion fuzz. Dim, vague, soft but, every now and then, one of them is snatched by sunlight. Illuminated.

He wanted steak. So he called someone down in LA who very shortly showed up to barbecue. David could definitely manifest.

His 'gee whiz' vocabulary made me laugh. I couldn't help it. Happily, he laughed too.

We both smoked. Chain-smoked. Grrrr…

My most vivid memory — this one more of a shiny nugget than dandelion fuzz — is of wearing the night-vision glasses he brought and running around the woods in the pitch-dark. We likely made too much noise, so we saw nothing but each other. But, hell, what a hoot.

BTW, 'Snootworld' is still up for grabs.

"If there was anything weird, it was how normal he was"

Chris Isaak on Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me

I SAW *ERASERHEAD* and loved it. It was like you'd walked into somebody else's dream. So when I found out David wanted to use my music in *Blue Velvet*, I was like, "You bet, let's go!" We became friends and my music was also used in *Wild At Heart* [Lynch also directed a music video for 'Wicked Game'] before I was cast in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* [as FBI agent Chester Desmond].

I was nervous on set because I was working with great actors and just trying not to get in the way. I did a scene with Harry Dean Stanton and [Kiefer Sutherland] and it was terrible. I thought, "Man, this is me. I'm screwing the scene up." But David had a gentleness and a kindness and he came over and took that scene apart, put it back together on the spot, made it work beautifully, and made me appear to be a decent actor through *his* ability. I had never seen any other director who could do that like him.

In another scene I'm arresting a sex worker [played by Yvonne Roberts] and David thought she should have a line, but she was terrified and didn't want to do it. But he was so gentle with her. A lot of directors would have just said, "Oh, give me somebody else," or yelled. I never saw him treat actors with anything less than love.

David had a childlike enthusiasm and it was like having a 12-year-old on set — he just seemed so happy to be there. He was so fun to do scenes with and [as Gordon Cole] he would just make things up on the spot. He had such a strong creative vision but was also really adaptable. People always ask what happened to my character because he just disappears. Well, in the script there was a boom and this big light was supposed to flash but it malfunctioned and we just moved on. I asked David what was supposed to happen to him and he said, "Just play your character up to where he stops and don't worry."

I bought him a paintball gun as a gift, and the guy from the store delivered it while we were finishing filming. He pulled up and opened the trunk and it was full of guns. I was there picking up a gun, holding it up to look at it, and then picking up another. Everyone on set is looking at me, like, "Oh my God, Isaak is nuts, he's buying a machine gun." David was shouting, "Are we done with this set?" Because he was like, "Now I'm going to destroy it" [with the gun].

People always used to ask: "David must be scary, weird or crazy?" No. With David, all his craziness and quirkiness you already saw — it's all on film. If there was anything weird, it was how normal he was.

It absolutely kills me that we're talking about him in the past tense. It breaks my heart. I could cry when I think he's gone. There really was nobody else like him.

AS TOLD TO DANIEL DYLAN WRAY

Alamy

Clockwise from main: "Hi, we're the FBI" — Kiefer Sutherland and Chris Isaak; Lynch as Gordon Cole with Isaak; The nightclub from hell; Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee); Special agents Kyle MacLachlan and David Bowie; The power of three.

Above: Seeing red — Bill Pullman as Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*. **Left:** Lynch on set with Patricia Arquette.

Dreamweaving

As novelist and *Lost Highway* co-screenwriter Barry Gifford remembers, working with Lynch was a continual joy

DAVID ALWAYS SAID, "All the green lights are blinking." He said that when he called me up about directing *Wild At Heart* [adapted from Gifford's novel, in 1989]. He was in love with Sailor and Lula; he thought it was a great, true love story. It just set him on fire.

We spoke the same language. In 1992 we did an HBO series called *Hotel Room*. David directed two plays of mine for that. The second one, they needed me to write in a week. As it turned out, I wrote it in two days, and they said, "This is only 17 pages, it's got to go 30 minutes." I said, "Well, who the fuck do you think is directing this?" David would stretch that into what we needed. And he read it and said, "Barry, this is perfect!" I knew that he would be able to do what I wrote; I was working specifically for David Lynch.

We wrote the first draft of *Lost Highway* in my studio. The title is a line from [Gifford's novel] *Night People:* "We're just a couple of Apaches riding wild on the lost highway." That sentence really captured him. He had this idea about somebody sending people videotapes of their lives, and they don't know who it is. Also, one day he was in his house and somebody rang the bell and David answered, but he couldn't see who it was downstairs at the door and the person said, "Dick Laurent is dead," and then he opens the door and there's nobody there. I thought that was a really good thing to use.

David always said, "We should never explain this movie." But we were surprised that people didn't follow it. Everything made sense to us, and that's all that mattered.

We always kept in touch; we were friends 'til the end. We talked about many other projects which never came to fruition. There was one that Madonna was supposed to star in. This was after *Wild At Heart*; [producer] Monty Montgomery wanted me and David to come up with a story that she could do. I wrote a story about a woman who worked in a bar in the countryside, and there was some conflict with the men she consorted with. But that went away. And then there was a project about a battery that could last forever. It had something to do with aliens.

David was a painter. Both he and Gus Van Sant, who was also a painter who became a film director, said the same thing to me: "I wanted to see my paintings move." And for me, it was wonderful to see my characters move. You get a kick, man. Especially if it's done well. And there was only one David Lynch.

AS TOLD TO ALEX GODFREY

Here: Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet*. **Below:** Laura Dern in *Wild At Heart*.

Here: Laura Harring and Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive*. **Below:** Joan Chen in *Twin Peaks*.

Fire Starters

Four Empire writers discuss Lynch's indelible female powerhouses

Christina Newland (Contributing Editor): David Lynch was interested in both exploring and subverting cinematic archetypes around womanhood, and was firmly rooted, in my view, in old Hollywood and the film-noir femme-fatale archetype. He was really interested in the symbolism of blonde women resembling a kind of purity, and then dark-haired women as more dangerous sexual beings.

Leila Latif (Contributor): He certainly leaned into female victimhood to a degree, but I don't say that in a derogatory way. A lot of women in his films suffer greatly, but he had an incredible sensitivity for their plight and gave really interesting depictions of sexual violence, and the misogyny which is like an air that their entire ecosystem is breathing in.

Iana Murray (Contributor): Accusations of misogyny against him never felt quite right. I think it's emblematic of, as you said, Leila, female victimhood — it's not so much a fetishisation of or fascination with it as it is a portrayal of the world as it is.

Beth Webb (News Editor): One of the more complicated relationships he had with an actor was with Isabella Rossellini on *Blue Velvet*. It was a wonderful performance, but a tough partnership, and yet it was wonderful to see her outpouring of love when the news broke of his passing.

Christina: Yeah, she brings a really uncomfortable sexual voraciousness to it, almost like someone who is clearly being abused and held against her will. She's displaying

Alamy, Showtime

Here: Sheryl Lee in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. **Below:** *Inland Empire*'s Laura Dern.

Here: Patricia Arquette in *Lost Highway*. **Below:** David Duchovny in *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

hypersexual behaviour, almost as a result of that. So there's something really uncomfortable about that performance; it's genuinely unnerving. She's a very beautiful woman, but it's so separate from anything erotic.

Leila: That's something I really appreciate about *Blue Velvet*. She is not devoid of sexuality in herself. Lynch's depictions of the sexual violence from [Dennis Hopper's] Frank Booth are kind of divorced from sexuality. Also, Laura Dern in *Blue Velvet* is the perfect antidote to Rossellini. Like you're saying, Christina, with the blonde and the brunette, just like *Mulholland Drive*.

Beth: The foundations of Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks* were in Marilyn Monroe, whom Lynch was originally planning to make a film about. "Who killed Laura Palmer?" was the driving mystery of the show, but she gets such a beautiful, albeit tragic, arc.

Iana: They made a Laura Palmer Funko Pop, but it was... her dead body in the body-bag. And I wonder if people take the wrong ideas from Lynch's films. Because people have talked so much about what his women go through, and only see it as about female victimhood, without grasping that there is a multiplicity to his women, that they have richer lives beyond their victimhood.

Christina: That's a really good point. Part of the reason *Twin Peaks* was so popular is the stuff that people love about true crime. Of course, Lynch was operating on a much different level, but it was saying something prurient about society and people being obsessed with the idea, as culture tends to be, of the beautiful, innocent teenage blonde: initially her life seems perfect, and what could possibly go wrong in this nice American town? But then *Fire Walk With Me* was not so well received, because it was showing all the ugliness from the inside, and maybe people weren't ready for that.

Leila: I found myself thinking a lot about *Twin Peaks* recently, even before Lynch passed, because TikTok has been giving me a lot of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, which basically has a sexually violent crime of the week, and it's striking how disposable these victims are on it. With *Twin Peaks*, we're sitting with a singular loss for such a long time, and so many different iterations. I read [Jennifer Lynch's] *The Secret Diary Of Laura Palmer*, and the idea that we don't move on from her, it's like they were holding something still quite precious and complex about her.

Iana: And then there was *Twin Peaks: The Return*, and one of the prevailing quotes from Lynch now is when he, as Gordon Cole, says, "Fix your hearts or die." Denise is played by a cis man (*David Duchovny*), but apart from that, Lynch's portrayal of trans women in the context of the original *Twin Peaks* felt ahead of its time. And in *The Return* there's this immediate acceptance. He says, "When you became Denise, I told all your colleagues — those clown comics — to fix their hearts or die." And that's such a beautiful sentiment.

Beth: *Wild At Heart* feels positively like a fairy tale compared to the other films we've been talking about. We actually are afforded a happy ending, if that's how we want to interpret it. Laura Dern has said she wanted to play Lula because she wasn't overtly sexual, but was very sure of herself, very comfortable with herself, and obviously a victim of sexual assault. Generally if you go through a film unscathed, you're not in a David Lynch film, but it does feel like the odd one out.

Leila: It always felt like Lynch was wrangling with his own relationship with his starlets a bit, certainly in *Inland Empire*, but very much with *Lost Highway*, where he's sort of reckoning with his own camera's objectification of Patricia Arquette's character.

Beth: I love the Naomi Watts audition scene in *Mulholland Drive*. You think you've got her figured out, and then that scene happens and suddenly there's this total seductress that comes out and dominates the story for just a couple of minutes, and then it's gone again.

Christina: Also the fact that it's this strange, temporal loop suggests that this has been going on in Hollywood from time immemorial, and will continue to go on. You see the waitress in the diner, and Naomi Watts' Betty looks at the waitress' name-tag and it says 'Betty'. This joke that every waitress in Hollywood is an aspiring actor. This weird food chain that just goes on and on and on. I think that's brilliant.

"His work emboldened the strangeness in me"

Writing for Empire, Censor filmmaker Prano Bailey-Bond describes how Lynch changed her life

I DON'T KNOW if I think about death more, less, or the same as other people... I often wonder whether I think about it a little more. I had, of course, considered that one day, David Lynch — the man I consider a creative godfather — would leave his earthly body. But on January 16th he had been on my mind in different ways; a conversation with a collaborator marvelling at how stylish Lynch's hair is, a moment visiting the Van Gogh exhibition where 'La Berceuse' inexplicably reminded me of a character from one of his worlds...

On the train home, my phone began to ping. Multiple messages from friends reading, simply, "David Lynch". I searched online and saw the news. A weight in my chest. I began to cry. As the tears kept flowing, my thoughts swung — "Is this a strange reaction for someone who didn't know him personally?" — to — "Why isn't EVERYONE on this train crying? Don't they know what's

Clockwise from main: The Lynchian dark beauty of Prano Bailey-Bond's *Censor*; The Man From Another Place (Michael J. Anderson) and Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) in *Twin Peaks*; The Beastman (Guillaume Delaunay) in *Censor*; Bonnie Aarons as 'the Bum' in *Mulholland Drive*; Another Lynchian sequence in *Censor*; Bailey-Bond at work.

Protagonist

happened?!" Perhaps they were just keeping it inside...

I first became aware of Lynch's work when I was seven. My teenage siblings were watching a new TV show called *Twin Peaks* and, because I wanted to do everything my cool older siblings did, I watched it too. I never expected what I saw on that little square box to burrow so deep and dark, somewhere no TV series had gone before... to resurface in my nightmares where The Man From Another Place visited, terrifying me for reasons I couldn't explain. I was hooked. It was now my 'treat' to stay up late once a week and inject more of that nightmare fuel into my brain. And when my sister got a T-shirt reading, "I Killed Laura Palmer", I stole it and wore it to primary school, deeply unimpressed by fellow pupils asking me what it meant (it appears I am quite judgey towards those unaware of Lynch).

In my teens I recorded *Blue Velvet* off the telly, luckily on a good-weather day (on bad-weather days in Wales, the video player would also record the fuzzy TV reception). I could now watch it on repeat. I was fascinated by the horror lurking beneath the 'perfect world' of Lumberton, captivated by the mystery, the tragedy of Dorothy, the romance of Sandy, the terror of Frank Booth. And Jeffrey, a squeaky-clean guy obsessed with this horrible, dark underbelly... Jeffrey is repressed, and Frank is offered as Jeffrey's id, telling him, "You're like me." I was amazed at how Lynch plays with the idea that, below the surface, the protagonist may be just like the villain. Terrifying. Fascinating. Wonderful. *Blue Velvet* was a revelation in ideas and tone, showing how cinema could explore the dark and the light, side-by-side, comparing how they function and appeal to our human senses. It lit up my mind. To this day it is my favourite film (I even named my cat Frank — also an unrepentant, vicious killer).

By the age of 19 I had moved to London, and took myself to see Lynch's new film, *Mulholland Drive*, at a cinema inside the Trocadero in Piccadilly Circus. A late-night Friday showing, I was one of five people in the audience — the others were two couples. I was there alone. Finally experiencing Lynch's work on the big screen was transcendent. The sound — haunting, immersive, deeply moving. The images even more delicious and hypnotic. *Mulholland Drive* pulled my brain apart and put it back together slightly differently. As the credits rolled, the other cinemagoers slipped out whilst I sat, absorbing the experience. It was late, and I had to exit through a different door, which led to a starkly lit concrete staircase. Each floor the same as the last; identical landings looping in an endless spiral. I kept going — one floor, another, then another — until I began to wonder if I was tunnelling into the Earth's core. Scrawled on the wall was "Will we ever get out of here"... Was I still in Lynch's world? Where had *Mulholland Drive* taken me? A creeping panic. I hurried, half-convinced I'd slipped into some kind of wormhole and might never get out. Then, suddenly, jarringly — I was spat into the neon blur of Friday-night Piccadilly Circus — a scene no less Lynchian than the staircase I'd escaped.

Lynch bent and expanded our minds. His work showed me another way — inspiring me deeply, emboldening the strangeness in me, assuring me it had a place in the world of filmmaking. I often think of how Lynch said his mother refused to give him colouring books, fearing they would limit his imagination. In many ways, Lynch extended that philosophy to a generation of creatives. Through his work, he urged us to rebel, to embrace the uncharted, the surreal, the beautifully bizarre. He is the role model this world needed — not only as a filmmaker, but as a person who remained endlessly curious, brimming with wonder, hope, and humour, until the end. I feel extremely lucky that my young mind was exposed to his ideas, to have lived in a time when Lynch was creating — when his work could help shape the way I approach art, storytelling, meditation, and the limitless possibilities of the imagination.

And even though no-one else on that train was outwardly crying, the outpouring of love for Lynch in the days following his death filled my heart with hope — "Look at all the other weirdos whose lives he touched," I thought — somehow proof there is still so much goodness in this dark, beautiful, strange world. Maybe the robins will come.

Out of the Park

NICK PARK, CREATOR OF *WALLACE & GROMIT*, ON LIFE WITH THE BELOVED DUO

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

WHEN THEY MADE Nick Park, they broke the mould. On Christmas Day just gone, nearly ten million people stopped stuffing their faces for 75 glorious minutes as they watched the welcome return of Park's clay creations, Wallace and Gromit, in a brand-new film, *Vengeance Most Fowl*. It was a particularly welcome return not just because, as a direct sequel to 1993's *The Wrong Trousers*, it brought back the dread penguin villain, Feathers McGraw, but because it was the first time Park had worked with Wallace, the affable and absent-minded inventor, and Gromit, his silent but seriously sharp dog, since 2008's *A Matter Of Loaf And Death*. "I feel like I've never been away from them," says Park. Perhaps time moves differently for people who work in stop-motion animation.

Park dreamed up the duo roughly 40 years ago, and then brought them to life with his bare hands, when he started making their debut short, *A Grand Day Out*, as a wildly ambitious student at the National Film And Television School. During the process, he persuaded Peter Sallis to become Wallace's iconic voice, and joined Aardman Animations in Bristol, who helped him finish it. A wise move. Nearly 35 years after *A Grand Day Out* debuted on Channel 4 (on Christmas Eve, firmly locking *Wallace & Gromit* in the country's festive consciousness), Aardman has expanded into one of the most reliable and creative production hubs on the planet, Wallace and Gromit have become national treasures, and at the heart of it all is the quiet, unassuming, multi-Oscar-winning Park, now 66. *Empire* caught up with him just before *Vengeance Most Fowl* aired, for an in-depth chat about his creations. When Park says they're always with him, he's not kidding. Right down to his choice of drinking apparatus...

Nick, are you drinking out of a Gromit mug?
Yes, I am.

I love that you're drinking from a mug that is the head of a character you created, what, 40 years ago?
About that. 1980, 1981-ish, yeah. I had this mug throughout the whole production. His nose glows red when the tea is hot.

Is that something you get used to, seeing the avalanche of *Wallace & Gromit* merchandise, things like statues and theme parks?
It's funny. It's constantly amazing to me. I have to stop, really, and pinch myself. The fact that these characters came into my head [when] I was a student. I started *A Grand Day Out*, and Aardman — Peter Lord and Dave

Aardman Animation/BBC, Imago

Above: Gromit, Norbot the smart gnome and Wallace in 2024's *Vengeance Most Fowl*. **Left:** Directors of the latest adventure, Merlin Crossingham and Nick Park.

Sproxton — took me on and kindly helped me finish, gave me space, and the camera to finish the film. But even their names were just a daft thing I thought up at film school, and here they are.

When did you first become aware they were breaking out?

It wasn't overnight. I made *A Grand Day Out*, it took me seven years in the end because I was part-time on it for four years as well. I finished it in 1989, and Channel 4 showed it first, actually, and then the BBC showed it. When the BBC commissioned *The Wrong Trousers*, they bought the rights to it off Channel 4. And it was particularly after *The Wrong Trousers* that things really happened. It made a big splash on the BBC and things started to take off after that. ›

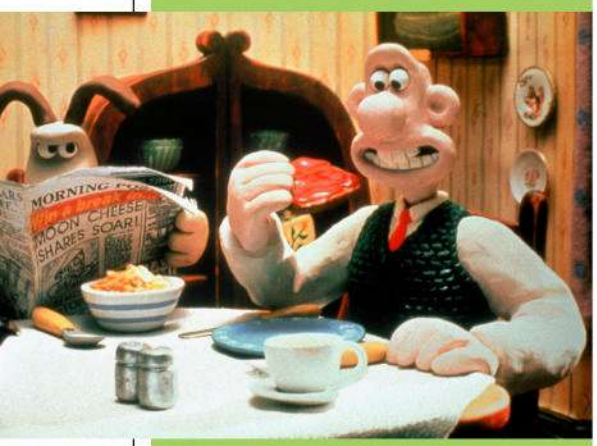
It's been 16 years since you made a *Wallace & Gromit* movie. Why the gap?
I've been up to different things, overseeing different things. I made *Early Man* in the meantime, which took about four years as well. They're always kind of happening, in some form or other. You're always just waiting for that idea, which actually did start back in *Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*. Gnomes have always been a part of Wallace and Gromit's world, of course, and it was kind of, "What if Wallace invented a smart gnome?" That was back in *Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*, and I've tinkered around with the idea a few times over the years. It just hit me suddenly that the whole idea needed a bit more, something more sinister behind it, and a motivated villain, because it wasn't enough just to have tech going wrong. And then Feathers McGraw seemed like the perfect solution.

So, you're already revisiting beloved characters, and then you throw Feathers into the mix, which must have added to the pressure. Is that pressure you've felt with every follow-up?
I didn't feel it with *The Wrong Trousers*. It could only get better, really, after my very whimsical *Grand Day Out*. I started working with Bob Baker, who used to write on *Doctor Who*, and I learned a lot more about plot and storytelling and making them more of a Hitchcockian thriller, really. It was more after *Wrong Trousers*, which seemed to hit the button for a lot of people. How can you repeat that? But I had more ideas that came naturally, with the introduction of Shaun The Sheep in *A Close Shave*. It all depends on the idea. Everything hangs on the idea. *Curse Of The Were-Rabbit* was the first vegetarian horror movie, that sort of thing. When you've got an idea and you think it's original and it works and it's got legs. And this one seemed to have legs, especially when Feathers came forward. But the pressure was there. I remember the anxiety I had initially was, "Wait a minute, people are going to associate this directly with *The Wrong Trousers*." And *The Wrong Trousers* is, in many people's minds, the best one, and it is to me, really, along with *Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*. So how do you follow that?
I pressure myself because I just want to better myself, really. I don't want to let the fans down, or screw things up.

But you're the number one fan of *Wallace & Gromit*. So if it's pleasing you, that's good, right?
I guess that's right. It's an instinctive thing in the end. I go by an inner sort of thing that tells me when it's right or wrong. But there's always a part of me that doubts, and I think that's partly where the creative tension is as well. If I was just blasé and confident, that could be a disaster. Even at the end of *The Wrong Trousers*, we spent ages mixing in the sound and everything, and no-one was laughing because everyone was trying to do their best job on it. And I came out thinking, "I've no idea if this is funny anymore. What if people don't like it?" And so I showed it at the Annecy Animation Festival, and it brought the roof down. It was like, "Wow, it's funny." You're suddenly reminded, all those jokes you've hung onto for the last couple of years, they're actually funny. And it's the same with this one. Even though we felt confident about it, there was a sense for Merlin [Crossingham] and I, who directed it together, that goes, "What if we missed the mark?" It's the risk you take, really.

Let's go back to the beginning, when you were sketching these guys in notepads. And initially they were quite different. Wallace had a moustache, and Gromit was a cat. For

Right: Park setting up a shot for *Chicken Run* (2000). **Below, left to right:** Errant leg-gear in *The Wrong Trousers* (1993); Shaun The Sheep and alien pal Lu-La in *A Shaun The Sheep Movie: Farmageddon* (2019); The villainous Feathers McGraw returns in *Vengeance Most Fowl*.



Above, left to right: Park favourite *The Curse Of The Were-Rabbit* (2005); 1989's *A Grand Day Out* — is that an eye-roll from the long-suffering Gromit? **Left:** Clone Norbots in *Vengeance Most Fowl*.

"I think there's a lot of me in Gromit."

how long was Gromit a cat?
Oh, about three sketches, really. I was thinking of him as a cat, but I tended to think of a cat with smaller and thinner limbs. With clay, that's automatically going to be a bit tricky to animate because you've got to get your fingers around certain bits to move it. It was just fiddly. I just started making Gromit as a dog because it was much easier to make, basically. Everything's bigger and bolder, and it could work with thicker, longer legs, which is automatically better for stop-motion clay animation as well. And he was going to speak to begin with — not an actual voice, but a Scooby-Doo voice. In the early designs you can see there's a mouth. But come the first day of filming *A Grand Day Out* at film school, I found I couldn't get my fingers near, and it was really difficult to change the mouth out. So I just started moving the brow up and down and found instantly it gave him a personality that I hadn't actually predicted. It suddenly made him look intelligent and thoughtful. And at the time Wallace was using him as a trestle to put the door on that he was sawing through, and Gromit looked really hacked-off and put-upon. He was rolling his eyes and thinking, "How do I put up with this guy?" And the whole thing was born, the dynamic between Wallace and Gromit. Gromit suddenly became the adult in the room, the human, really, with thoughts and feelings, and Wallace was the daft agent of chaos, the child, that would come up with things without thinking about his poor friend. It was the perfect tension and comedy dynamic.

Why did you lose the 'tache?
I lost it quite early, because making Wallace as a figure in clay, the 'tache would have just got in the way all the time, doing all the lip-sync. It was just a practical thing. And he had a flat cap on as well. I think I felt he was a bit of a clichéd Northerner. Not that he isn't anymore.

It's amazing how fully formed they were. All these years later, the dynamic hasn't changed.
The thing we do is just find ways of stretching the tension between the characters. There's nothing greatly dynamic in terms of a mild-mannered guy that likes inventing and cheese and lives in a little terrace with his dog, whose quiet life is constantly disrupted by this man-child owner. But it offers a lot of scope to play with, surprisingly, and that's what we've done each time. The joke has been, all the time, that Wallace never learns anything. If there's an arc, usually it's Gromit's. They're always like an elderly couple to me, really. Obviously, there's a deep-down love for each other, but there's constant irritation. So they're real in that sense. In *Vengeance Most Fowl*, Wallace does have a slight arc. He does learn something, but we have to keep it in a comedic way. It's a very slight change, but it's a very important one.

You paid Peter Sallis £50 to voice Wallace for *A Grand Day Out*. Was that your own money?
That was while I was at film school. There was a limited student budget. I wrote to Peter Sallis to ask him, and I could only pay him £50. He agreed to do it, as a favour for a student, and he wrote a letter back with a cassette tape. I thought, because I knew him well from *Last Of The Summer Wine*, that he had a northern accent, and when I got the tape back, he read out the 20-page script to see if I liked what he had in mind for Wallace. And I was so surprised, because he sounded quite posh. It went something like, "Hello, Nick, Peter here. I wondered if this is what you thought Jerry might sound like." He was called Jerry in that very first script, actually, before he changed to Wallace.

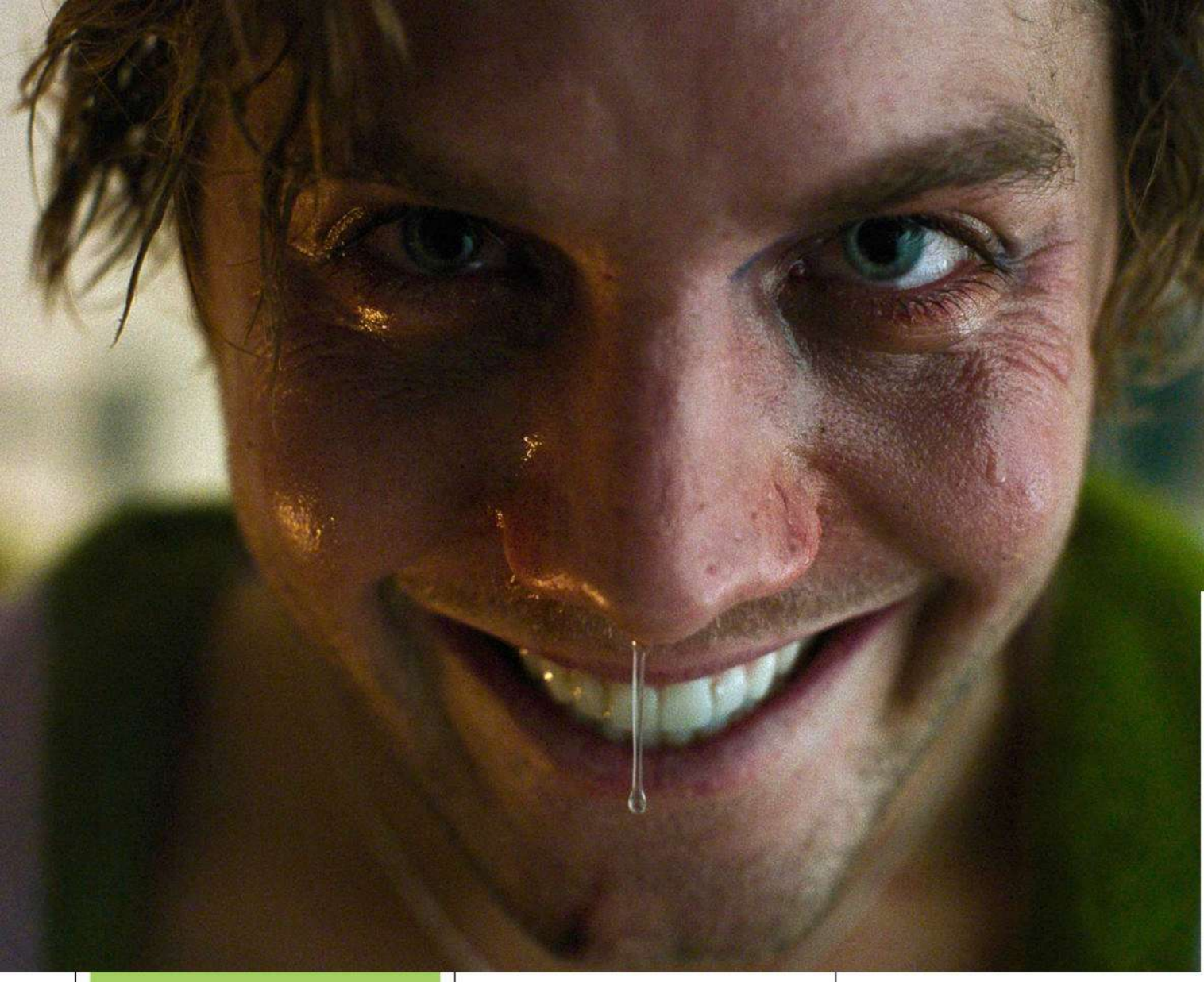
How long was he Jerry?
Only on the very first draft that a friend of mine, who was an art student from Sheffield, wrote in a pub in Notting Hill Gate. I changed him to Wallace shortly after that.

If you'd kept the moustache, and Gromit had been a cat, and Wallace had been called Jerry, we might not be sitting here now, Nick.
It doesn't work, does it? 'Jerry & Gromit'.

You've said in the past that your dad was partially an influence on Wallace.
Very much. I didn't realise that I'd made a film about my dad until after making *A Grand Day Out*. It wasn't a conscious thing at all. Afterwards, I kind of remembered how my dad behaves a lot like Wallace, how he loved being in the shed and making things. Although a lot of people who went to my old school in Preston often [ask if he was] based on my English teacher. I can see why they say it, because he also had a green tank top. But it wasn't conscious.

Did your dad recognise himself?
I think he did. He liked being associated with Wallace. Whereas my mum was the opposite, a bit more like Gromit, and would always roll her eyes at everything he did and said. But Gromit, I think I really relate to myself, actually. I think there's a lot of me in Gromit. For me, it's the power of the introvert. I think, "Gosh, how did this all happen? This shy boy in Preston who just somehow happened to find animation as a hobby in his teens, and now has a statue of Wallace and Gromit in his hometown." It's incredible to think of it really.

***WALLACE & GROMIT: VENGEANCE MOST FOWL* IS AVAILABLE NOW ON THE BBC IPLAYER, AND ON NETFLIX OUTSIDE THE UK**



SPOILER SPECIAL

Smile 2

DIRECTOR PARKER FINN ON THE SHOCKS OF HIS STUNNING SEQUEL

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

PARKER FINN'S *SMILE 2* was one of the best mainstream horrors of last year, a slickly directed scarefest that built upon the world and mythology established in the first film, and centred on an astonishing Naomi Scott as a pop star whose already fragile grip on reality is further weakened when she's assaulted by the smiling demon. Here, Finn talks us through the key moments...

SILLY, JOEL

The first movie ended with the curse being passed on to Kyle Gallner's cop, Joel. Rather than follow Joel's story for an entire movie, Finn restricts it to the film's prologue, a single-shot sequence in which an increasingly panicked Joel tries to pass the curse onto some local drug dealers, it all ending very badly via interface with a truck. "I wanted to drop us into a world that felt like nothing we had seen before," says Finn. "You wouldn't even know it's a *Smile* film. And by the end, I knew I wanted to announce that this is a *Smile* film, very overtly, with what Joel's body is turned into." Finn is referring to a blood-streak on the ground that forms a familiar shape. A frown turned upside down, you could say.

INTRODUCING SKYE RILEY

The first time we meet Skye clues us into her megastar status, as she's appearing on *The Drew Barrymore Show*. With Actual Drew Barrymore, in her first horror film since *Scream* (*Donnie Darko* fans, take your complaints elsewhere). "I wrote the scene and sent it to Drew along with a note," says Finn, "and she was so gracious in saying yes." It was shot on the talk-show's actual set, onto which the film's camera equipment was lugged. "The previous day we had shot something quite gross, and the dolly still had blood all over it," he laughs. "I was like, 'This is probably the first time there's been blood on this set!'"

SKYE, MEET SMILE

We first see Skye's talk-show appearance on a TV which, it turns out, belongs to drug dealer Lewis (Lukas Gage), who inherited the curse from Joel thanks to that opening prologue snafu. When Skye shows up at his apartment, a crazed Lewis submits to the demon and smashes his own face in with a weight plate. "It's definitely one of the most violent things I've ever done, which is saying something," grins Finn. "I wanted to make [it] sort of an echo of the Laura death from the first film." And they say working out is good for you.

SKYE IS FALLING

Almost immediately, Skye — whose mental health is already fragile as a result of a traumatic car crash which killed her boyfriend and left her

with a crippling addiction to painkillers — finds that the demon is everywhere she goes, mocking, taunting, undermining. One memorable sequence sees Skye freak out at a charity fundraiser, after seeing an apparition of said dead boyfriend. "It felt so different from the first film to me," explains Finn of selecting a pop star as his lead character. "As a public figure, she's expected to put on this persona constantly, always be on, always be performing. But behind the scenes, the real human being is this broken, fragile, vulnerable person. It felt really fascinating."

THE DANCE TROUPE

"If you don't deal with the entity fast enough, it begins to manipulate you in ways that become so disorienting that it can almost get you to do anything," explains Finn. Part of *Smile 2*'s appeal lies in trying to figure out what is real and what is a hallucination in the film's breakneck last 30 minutes, during which Skye seemingly kills her own mother, going on the run with a best friend who turns out to be a demonic projection, and winds up battling the Monstrosity in the freezer of an abandoned Pizza Hut. We say 'seemingly', because the movie's end (we'll get to that) implies that none of what we see in the third act really happened. "In the second film, the audience is ahead of Skye in what's going on, right?" Finn says. "I wanted to see, 'Can I use that against them?'" A pivotal moment comes when Skye is attacked in her apartment by the most terrifying dance troupe in movie history. "The end of that sequence, with that arm going into her mouth and down her throat, and how we black out from there?" teases Finn. "That, for me, is a turning point."

SKYE HAS FALLEN

"The world of *Smile* is quite bleak and mean-spirited," admits Finn. Which is one hell of an understatement. For the second film in a row, Finn's hero succumbs to the Smile. This time in spectacular fashion, as the possessed Skye makes her big live comeback memorable in the worst possible way, by killing herself in front of thousands of shocked spectators. Which means that the demonic infection might have expanded aggressively. "It definitely opens up a lot of possibilities," teases Finn. "There's a lot of interesting ways that that could go if suddenly, let's say, more than one person has it."

MIC-DROP MOMENT

Skye's tragic end — by way of ramming her microphone into her brain through one of her eyes — was inevitable, according to Finn. "Around the same time as the discovery of the character, the ending unlocked in my mind," he says. "But I wanted to make sure the journey to get there was very unexpected. If I could get audiences as far from that concert as possible, then to undo all of that and reverse it and reveal what's actually happening felt like such a shock to the system, and such a delightfully cruel twist of fate."

THE FINAL CURTAIN

The final shot, of Skye's lifeless corpse, is certainly a memorable one. "As much as I knew I was going to open on Joel's face, I knew I was going to end on Skye's, in the circumstances that she's in," says Finn. The sequence was shot at an arena in Albany, in front of around 400 extras who were later digitally expanded into 20,000. "We were shooting under a false title ['Too Much For One Heart'], because a lot of people were trying to scoop what the movie was about." For that reason, Finn didn't shoot Skye's death scene in front of the extras, which meant he had to mis-direct their reactions. "I gave them a totally false thing about what they were reacting to," he adds, "but I always wanted this idea of the audience at the show staring through the screen at the audience in the movie theatre. It felt very meta." Wait, hang on — does that mean we're infected now too? Stop smiling. This is no laughing matter.

***SMILE 2* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Whiplash

THE DRUMMER EPIC THAT NEITHER RUSHES NOR DRAGS

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

He bangs the drums: Fletcher (J.K. Simmons) gives Andrew (Miles Teller) some stick.

JASON BLUM, founder and CEO of Blumhouse Productions, has effectively shaped modern horror with his low-budget approach to high-concept scares. *Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious*, *Sinister*, *Get Out*, the *Halloween* retcons — he's got a lot of nightmarish notches on his belt.

But arguably the best horror film on Blum's CV isn't even a horror film. *Whiplash* is a film about drumming in which there are blistered fingers, battered eardrums and bruised egos galore. But nobody gets killed. And yet, it's as gripping and gruelling as it gets.

Of course, Jason Blum isn't the creative driving force behind *Whiplash*, and would probably be the first to say that. That would be the film's wunderkind director, Damien Chazelle, who was in his late twenties back in 2012, and getting frustrated with his inability to get *La La Land* off the ground in La La Land. In response, he fired off a script inspired by his own experiences as a wannabe jazz drummer at Princeton High School. It was vibrant, angry, vital, and unlike anything else out there.

But when it was brought to Blum's attention by a then-junior executive, he wasn't wowed. He has since admitted that he thought the screenplay, which would eventually garner one of the film's five Oscar nominations, was merely "okay", and that it was the presence of Jason Reitman, as a fellow producer, that made him sign on and pony up. Reitman had seen the promise in Chazelle's script, and recommended his friend J.K. Simmons for the role of Terence Fletcher, a tyrannical but brilliant conductor at prestigious New York music school Shaffer, who identifies the burgeoning talent in a young drummer called Andrew Neiman, and bullies the hell out of him in an attempt to unlock it.

Simmons, a classically trained musician who had nearly become a conductor, responded to the script like it had been written just for him. He starred in a 15-minute proof-of-concept short film, produced by Reitman's Right Of Way Films and Blumhouse, which pitted him against Johnny Simmons (no relation) as Andrew. And he was astonishing. The short, which is still freely available on YouTube, has no sense of a big-name actor phoning it in for some kids' short.

About a year later, Simmons (J.K., that is) found himself filming the same sequence again, pretty much word-for-word, after Chazelle had got the nod, a $3.3 million budget, and a breakneck 19-day, 14-hours-a-day schedule to turn *Whiplash* into a feature. And there is practically zero difference between Simmons' performances, in terms of intensity, pitch and delivery.

By the time the movie version started filming, in September 2013 (around four months before it debuted, to great acclaim, at Sundance), Johnny Simmons was no longer in the picture. Instead, Miles Teller — who had some drumming experience himself, allowing him to convincingly hit the kit throughout — was in as Andrew. Given that J.K. Simmons went on to win a richly deserved Oscar, much of the hubbub surrounding *Whiplash* focused on him. But Teller, who's in every single scene, is magnificent.

Whiplash is all about the dynamic between Fletcher and Andrew, between a teacher who believes that no coal ever became a diamond without experiencing extreme pressure, and a pupil who might just be that diamond, but who is also a wilting flower, soft in the middle, lacking in confidence. It's a dynamic we've seen a hundred times. Gifted student, inspirational teacher, yawn. But it's here that *Whiplash* becomes a horror film.

Fletcher is one of the great movie monsters. He's a mocking, malevolent force of nature who has appointed himself one task in life — to find the next Charlie Parker — and one way to do it, through violence of the soul. From the first scene, where he drops by to watch Andrew rehearsing, he effectively wages psychological warfare on the young drummer, whether it's hurling insults — the now-iconic "not my fucking tempo" — or chairs at him. In one scene, he pits Andrew and some rivals against each other in a marathon audition to take the lead spot in his jazz orchestra, and isn't happy until he's reduced them to blubbering wrecks, stippling their drum kits with their own blood. He's Beelzebub with a baton, bellowing, "If you want the fucking part, earn it!"

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of *Whiplash*, though, is that Andrew more than meets Fletcher halfway. Andrew is a victim of Fletcher's abuse, but a willing one, who believes that this is the road he must take if he wants to attain true greatness. *Whiplash* is about the price of perfection. It asks, 'How far are you willing to go to succeed?' In Andrew's case, pretty damn far. He dumps his girlfriend Nicole (Melissa Benoist) because he thinks she'll hold him back.

Below, top to bottom: Phoning it in; Nicole (Melissa Benoist) and Andrew all smiles — for now; The professor of percussion takes the lead.

He becomes more aggressive with his fellow musicians. He begins to believe his own hype. It's only after he has a car crash and (in the film's only on-the-nose piece of symbolism/cymbalism) insists on playing at a competition anyway, only to fuck up and get drummed out, that he calls foul on Fletcher's conductorly conduct.

Up until then, *Whiplash* is constructed and edited brilliantly (by Tom Cross), jagged, ragged cuts giving us a sense of urgency that prefigured *Uncut Gems*, enhanced by Justin Hurwitz's panic-attack score. But after this point, the movie sags for a bit. Even when Andrew and Fletcher cross paths as civilians, it seems to be noodling to a fairly bland conclusion. Not our fucking tempo.

But then Chazelle twirls the sticks and gives us a showstopper finale in which Andrew, having been humiliated publicly by Fletcher, storms onto stage and launches into the Duke Ellington-Juan Tizol standard, 'Caravan', playing with a poise and power and presence that until now had been somehow absent.

It is one of the great conclusions. There is no dialogue. Instead, there is only effort and exertion as Andrew delivers the greatest drum solo in movie history, a dizzying five-minute deluge of tricks and licks that still takes the breath away. He becomes the drummer that he, and Fletcher, always thought he could be.

It's utterly exhilarating, an ending designed to leave you bouncing. But it's coloured with complexity. In defying Fletcher, Andrew becomes exactly what Fletcher wants. What they both want. The movie ends with a close-up of Fletcher's gimlet eyes, blazing in triumph; and a shot of Andrew smiling briefly just before he pounds the drums for the final flourish. The monster and his victim, working in harmony. Andrew's tempo, Fletcher's tempo, it's all the same now. And there's nothing scarier than that.

***WHIPLASH* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

Imago, Paramount, Sony

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 DRESSED TO KILL

(OUT 3 MARCH, 4K BR)

One of Brian De Palma's most deranged Hitch riffs, specifically on *Psycho*, in which Nancy Allen and Michael Caine become embroiled in a murder mystery. Perhaps the strongest section is the Angie Dickinson-led opening third, but what follows is solid De Palma, as he gleefully indulges many of his preoccupations (sex, murder, voyeurism). The twist, in a movie made 45 years ago, might not work for many today, but what is undeniable is that Caine gives it his all.

2 PADDINGTON IN PERU

(OUT 17 FEBRUARY, DVD/BR/4K BR/DIGITAL)

Yes, Dougal Wilson's trilogy-capper isn't up to the standard laid down by Paul King in the first two Paddington movies, but given their beloved status, there's no shame in that. What we do get here is perhaps what the Paddington movies might have been all along: a warm and gently inventive kids' film that has an emotional kick waiting in reserve.

3 CONSTANTINE

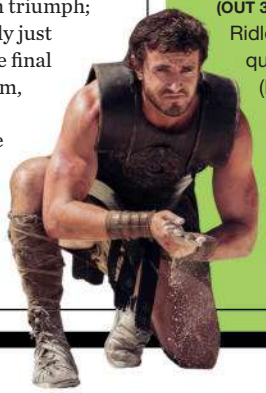
OUT 17 FEBRUARY, 4K BR)

Now 20 years old (shudder), time has been kind to Francis Lawrence's comic-book adaptation, which now sits proudly in the pantheon of Keanu Reeves action movies. As punk exorcist John Constantine, Reeves is a world away from the blond Scouser of the *Hellblazer* comic, but his deadpan nature fits this film like a glove. And if Peter Stormare isn't cinema's greatest Satan, he's certainly in the top 666.

4 GLADIATOR II

(OUT 3 MARCH, DVD/BR/4K BR/DIGITAL)

Ridley Scott's return to Rome doesn't quite have the impact of his original (Paul Mescal, while a brilliant actor, lacks Russell Crowe's sheer magnetism), but is still worth your time, filled as it is with rousing set-pieces aplenty, and a great turn from Denzel Washington, chomping so much scenery it's no wonder the Colosseum is missing a roof.



Back in the hunt

AS HAMMER HIDDEN GEM **CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER** GETS A RE-RELEASE, *EMPIRE* TALKS TO STAR CAROLINE MUNRO

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE Hunter is the last vampire film Hammer ever made. And one of the best. Freed from the creative coffin of Dracula, writer/director Brian Clemens (in the only movie he would ever make) set about tweaking both bloodsuckers and bloodsucker-botherer, in the shape of a sword-wielding, swashbuckling hero (the late Horst Janson, who died in January). Naturally, it was not well-received at the time, but its reputation has only grown in the 50 years since its release. So much so that it's the first Hammer film to get the 4K bells-and-whistles re-release treatment, since the company was acquired by nominative-determinism fave, John Gore. *Empire* caught up with Hammer legend and *Kronos* co-star Caroline Munro to say fangs for the etc, etc.

THE BEGINNING

Munro, who was then in her early twenties, was under contract to Hammer for two films, and had already made an eye-catching turn in *Dracula A.D. 1972*, where she's brutally murdered by Christopher Lee's Count. For the second, she was offered the role of Carla, a mysterious woman who is freed from a set of stocks by Kronos in the film's opening scene. "She's a bit of a rebel," says Munro of Carla. "She does her own thing." It gives her one of the best character introductions in the Hammer canon, lifting back a shock of hair to reveal her face, which captivates Kronos. "What a mess!" laughs Munro. "We shot that twice, max. We didn't have much light."

THE CAPTAIN

As Kronos, Clemens cast Horst Janson, a German actor of wiry frame and commanding presence. "He was lovely," recalls Munro. "He was very committed to the part. And he spoke very good English." Which, ultimately, stood him in little stead because Hammer bosses, as they often did, re-dubbed his voice, with an uncredited Julian Holloway stepping in. "I didn't know [at the time]," says Munro. "Because for all the world, to me that was his voice. It sounded exactly like him. His voice was perfect, I thought." How far did this re-dubbing drama go — did Christopher Lee actually sound like Joe Pasquale? We must know.

Main: Carla (Caroline Munro) with vampire-hunter Captain Kronos (Horst Janson). **Above**: Master swordsman Kronos is ready to strike fear into vampire hearts. **Right**: Lady Durward (Wanda Ventham) gets the fangs out.

THE ROMANCE

Naturally, Kronos and Carla quickly like the cut of each other's thrust. One early exchange sees Carla tell Kronos she'll stick around, "if you'll have me". To which Kronos replies, in his best Sid James, "Oh, I'll have you." It's not quite 'Carry On Dracula', but it's not far off. Yet Munro is proud of the love affair that blossoms between Kronos and Carla. "It's beautiful and tender," she says. "We had to do a love scene, and I was slightly reticent to do that. So I spoke to Hammer and to Brian, and he said, 'I think we can work around it.' So I had long hair which was stuck to my chest, and what camera people call 'Charlie Bars', things you can put in front of the lights to block out things. And it gave it such a beautiful feeling." Taste and restraint was possible in late-era Hammer, after all.

THE DIRECTOR

TV would treat Clemens better than the movies. He had already created *The Avengers* (not that

Above, top to bottom: Sara Durward (Lois Daine) feels the fear; Lord Hagen Durward (William Hobbs) laid low; Jane (Linda Cunningham) has the youth sucked out of her; Carla models a 'shabby' look.

Alamy, Imago, Verve Pictures

one), and would go on to create another iconic British TV show, *The Professionals*. He had written *Doctor Jekyll & Sister Hyde* for Hammer, but *Captain Kronos* remains the only movie he would ever direct. "I asked him why he didn't direct again," says Munro. "He said, 'Well, quite frankly, I don't think I was asked.' I don't know why, because he was brilliant. He was wonderful with the crew, and the actors loved him."

THE SHOOT

The movie, like many Hammer flicks, is set in an indeterminate European country. But the studio's parsimonious ways confined the shoot to Elstree Studios for the interiors, and locations around Ampthill Park in Bedfordshire, and Buckinghamshire. "A lot of it was shot very near where Brian lived," laughs Munro, who was barefoot throughout the shoot. "It was cold, it was muddy. And every day we shot on location, the costume would get caught on brambles, which gave it a sort of shabby look. I can't say shabby chic..."

THE ACTION

Kronos is a man who prefers swords to stakes, and really comes into his own in the film's final fight, in which he goes blade-to-blade with William Hobbs' Lord Durward, the resurrected husband of the film's lead vampire. Hobbs was a trained fencer and leading fight choreographer, who had literally written the book on stage fighting. Two, in fact. "It was such a good scene," says Munro. "We took two days to shoot that, but they had to cut it down. I remember it was long because I had to stand, mesmerised, for a long time." Luckily, she didn't get caught in the crossfire. "They were very close," says Munro. "We just had to stay stock still, and you can see, when the swords are just flying past our faces, our hair lifting a bit."

THE LEGACY

"It was revolutionary," says Munro of Clemens' movie, and in many ways she's right. Clemens eschewed the conventional approach to vampires, and fashioned a world in which there were many varieties of vampires, all with different strengths and weaknesses. The chief vampire here, for instance, doesn't drink blood from her victims, but their youth, in an attempt to stay forever young. And immortality is very much on Munro's mind as the film ticks into its sixth decade. "The movie will live on forever, as long as film is around," she says. "At the time, sadly people didn't get it. I think it was a bit too esoteric for the time. But it was so beautiful." Due to its reception, and Hammer collapsing soon after, a sequel was never made. But if the new Hammer, rising from the ashes, were to start raiding the old archives for remakes, resurrecting the good Captain would be a great place to start. They could even let him keep his own voice this time.

***CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER* IS OUT NOW ON 4K BLU-RAY**

End of the voyage

AS THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER FINALLY ARRIVES, *EMPIRE* TALKS DRACULA AND DELAYS WITH DIRECTOR ANDRÉ ØVREDAL

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IT TAKES A lot to stop Dracula. Stakes, sunlight, the odd beheading have tended to do the trick over the years in scores of films, but he's never truly down for the Count. But the best way to put the brakes on the Transylvanian terror is, it turns out, to keep him locked up in a vault.

That is the fate that befell André Øvredal's *The Last Voyage Of The Demeter*, a horror film extrapolated from a single chapter, 'The Captain's Log', in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in which the vampire wreaks havoc aboard a ship carrying him, in his coffin, to England. Eagerly anticipated, as any film from the director of *Trollhunter* and *The Autopsy Of Jane Doe* should be, it opened in the States in August 2023, and was due to arrive in the UK around the same time. Only to disappear, completely, off release schedules. And that's the way it stayed, for well over a year. "A lot of people reached out to me," Øvredal tells *Empire*. "Friends and strangers, through every channel I'm on, asking about the movie. There was nothing I could do."

Now, those questions will trouble him no more, because *The Last Voyage Of The Demeter* has finally reached these shores on shiny disc, hot on the heels of a digital release. So, what happened? "It was very unfortunate timing," explains the Norwegian director. "eOne, the distributor behind the movie, closed shop in the UK, literally a couple of weeks before our release, so we didn't have a distributor."

For a director, watching your film plunge into limbo is a sobering experience. "It was shocking and sad," he adds. "I really thought this movie would play really well in the UK. I was hoping for a nice release there, but you just have to roll with the punches."

Rolling with the punches had been Øvredal's approach from the off on the movie, which essentially combined all the elements they say you should stay away from as a filmmaker: animals, children, water. But the shooting of the movie itself was mostly smooth sailing. "There were [tricky] times, especially during storm sequences," he laughs. "When the boat is supposed to rock, and you have water coming in, and you have rain towers and water cannons and lighting effects, and it's so noisy you can't hear a thing. But it was an unforgettable experience."

Had *The Last Voyage Of The Demeter* made a splash at the US box office, where it marked the latest attempt by Universal to trade on Dracula's good name, it's entirely possible that the movie would have been snapped up by an enterprising distributor. Sadly, though, the film made just $13.6 million in the States, and that was that. "I'm very proud of the film," adds Øvredal. "The release wasn't so successful, but I see a lot of people absolutely loving it."

Rightly so, because what Øvredal has made

> "The UK is the most important country in the world to see the film."
>
> **ANDRÉ ØVREDAL**

Main: The film's striking poster artwork. **Left:** Dracula (Javier Botet) stalks the doomed crew of the merchant ship Demeter.

Above, top to bottom: Crew members Wojchek (David Dastmalchian), Abrams (Chris Walley) and Clemens (Corey Hawkins) smell a rat — er, bat; Hawkins and director André Øvredal on set; Liam Cunningham, right, as Captain Eliot; Stowaway Anna (Aisling Franciosi) with Clemens.

is a Dracula movie that dares to be different. Most movies featuring Stoker's super-sucker tend to humanise the Count, to give him a suave appearance, or to accentuate the sexual undertones of a vampire's bite. *The Last Voyage Of The Demeter* does none of that — instead, this is a Dracula who'll rip your throat out as soon as look at you. Not for this guy a series of little deaths. He's only interested in the big one. "That was very attractive to me," admits Øvredal. "I always saw him as basically a blood addict. It's about survival. We designed him as a really fragile creature that eventually becomes the angel of death. He becomes a demon."

When you finally cast eyes on this Dracula, you're going to see a creature a million miles away from Christopher Lee or Gary Oldman or even the greatest of them all, Gerard Butler in *Dracula 2000*. This is truly a demonic, bat-like figure, played by Javier Botet, one of the best creature character actors in the business, who's lent his spindly, slender frame to the likes of *Mama* and *The Boogeyman*. Øvredal's inspiration here was more H.R. Giger than Hammer. "There's an alien quality to him," adds the director. "We were very conscious of making him as anatomically correct as you can do with a human bat. We were always talking about the *Salem's Lot* vampire and, of course, Nosferatu, and those were, in some ways, our main references. But I'm not big on homage. I want every movie to be its own thing."

Be that as it may, *Demeter*'s delayed release means that it's coming out at pretty much the same time as Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu*. Which, being a thinly veiled adaptation of *Dracula*, sails into very familiar territory, with Bill Skarsgård's Count Orlok secreting himself aboard a vessel and treating himself to a little mid-voyage snack in the shape of the entire crew. "I see a lot of online conversations, in comparison with *Nosferatu*," says Øvredal, who has not yet had time to see Eggers' film as he's just started filming on a new, mystery-shrouded horror film. "There seems to be a high energy around Dracula these days."

That's an understatement. But now that his version of the vampire is out over here ("The most important country in the world to see the film," according to Øvredal), the director's long voyage has finally come to an end. And he knows just how to mark the occasion. "The first thing I'm going to do," he says, "is reach out to the distributor and get a copy myself."

THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

The Ranking

The Transformers movies

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS TACKLE ONE TITANIC FRANCHISE. GOOD FILMS IN DISGUISE?

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
Incredibly, he's less than meets the eye.

HELEN O'HARA
Wishes the films would transform into 'watchable'.

AMON WARMANN
His Optimus impression is, sadly, sub-Prime.

LIAM H DEMPSEY
Thinks the 1986 movie is Orson Welles' best work.

Chris: So, then, *Transformers*. One of the most successful franchises in the history of cinema. But not one that I'd say is universally beloved.
Helen: Of the live-action movies, the majority are pretty bad. I don't hate all the Michael Bay films, but he does go for the lowest-common-denominator humour.
Chris: I think he has a very low boredom threshold, and he fills that by having characters act in utterly bizarre ways.
Helen: When he can dial it back, that's his best film work. On the first *Transformers* movie he made, because he had Spielberg as a producer maybe, you got a little bit of that Amblin-ness.
Liam: But you also still have the ogling of Megan Fox over the car bonnet.
Chris: I was thinking about this today — how quickly that franchise went from the first film being a genuine cultural event to, just ten years later, people going to see *The Last Knight* as if they'd been forced to at gunpoint.
Liam: *The Last Knight* is horrifically bad. I think by then *Transformers* had become a bit of a golden cage for him.
Helen: I think he's actively gotten worse as an action director during these films.
Chris: *The Last Knight* is not the worst movie in the Bay *Transformers* canon. That's *Revenge Of The Fallen* for me. It's a pretty wretched, rancid, unlikeable movie. Whereas *The Last Knight* has the line, "That's the watch that killed Hitler. Don't screw with it."
Amon: *The Last Knight* is just too ridiculous for me.
Chris: What do you mean, too ridiculous? It's about shape-shifting robots from another planet.
Amon: It's a matter of degree when it comes to this franchise, but *The Last Knight* just takes it too far. And *Revenge Of The Fallen* doesn't just have good action, it has *great* action.
Helen: It's got my favourite effect in the whole series. In truck form, Optimus Prime rolls out of the back of a cargo plane, transforms into a robot to skydive, and then he lands and rolls back into a truck.
Chris: I'm a sucker for great Optimus Prime moments, and admittedly that is a great Optimus Prime moment.
Amon: That's one of my big problems with the Bayverse. Too much time on the humans when there should be more time focused on the robots.
Chris: The first Bay movie is great. I don't think there's a five-star film in this franchise, but if there is one, it might be that. It has so many great moments, and it's easy to forget now what a breath of fresh air Shia LaBeouf was.
Helen: I did watch it for this, and it did slightly pale for me. But it's still by far the best of the Bay films. The action is brilliantly done. ILM's work on that film is astonishing.
Amon: The first movie has the best scene of the entire franchise, when the Autobots arrive. It's spectacular, and has a level of awe and majesty that no other scene comes close to matching.
Chris: Is anyone going to argue for the Bay sequels?
Helen: I enjoyed the reinvention of Apollo history in *Dark Of The Moon*.
Liam: I think *Dark Of The Moon* is the second-best Bay movie in the franchise. It's the only other one in those five you could argue is a good movie.
Chris: I wrote the review for *Empire*, and gave it two stars. I was surprised, when I revisited it for this, by how much better it was than I remembered. It has that astonishing skyscraper sequence, which just boggles my mind.
Amon: It frustrates me because there are scenes which hint at genuine greatness, like a conversation about leadership between Optimus and Sentinel Prime.
Chris: What about *Age Of Extinction*? It's got everything you could want from a movie. It's got Kelsey Grammer, it's got T.J. Miller being killed horribly, it's got "My face is my warrant", which was our line of that year, delivered by Titus Welliver.
Helen: The dinosaur robots aren't as much fun as I thought they'd be. You do get Optimus Prime riding into battle on a dinosaur. Marks for that, but it's not enough to forgive the rest of the film.
Chris: Let's move onto the non-Bay live-action movies, *Bumblebee* and *Transformers: Rise Of The Beasts*. Neither of those did that well at the box office, relatively speaking, and maybe that's why the franchise is currently in limbo. But with *Bumblebee*, was going from

The Last Knight to Travis Knight an upgrade?
Amon: *Bumblebee* was the film the franchise needed at that time.
Helen: But not what the franchise deserved.
Amon: The franchise at that point was drowning in silliness, drowning in excess, drowning in nonsensical plotting.
Chris: Hey, be careful. That's the watch that killed Hitler.
Amon: So for *Bumblebee* to be as simple and intimate as it was, to bring the heart back to the franchise, was very necessary.
Helen: Hailee Steinfeld is fabulous. And it shows you that one day you could have a car that transforms into a robot.
Liam: I don't love it quite as much as some. It's too similar to the first Bay in terms of the central idea and story. While it's the palate-cleanser we probably needed after the Bay films, I do miss some of that scale.
Chris: It's a really sweet film, it's got a great '80s soundtrack, but I think it's a little safe. It's the Transformers movie it's okay to like.
Helen: I think "safe" is harsh. A well-executed story, even one that's been told before, is preferable to some of the shit in this franchise.
Liam: *Bumblebee* is way more successful than *Rise Of The Beasts*, which is doing the same story again.
Helen: There are some good human performances there, but the plotting is extremely tired. I don't think the '90s setting added anything to it. But it didn't offend me in the way some of the others have.
Amon: It's fine. It's completely lacking in the Bayhem spectacle, and it's not a Transformers film I find myself hungry to return to.
Chris: Let's talk about the animated movies that top and tail Transformers on the big screen. *The Transformers: The Movie*, from 1986, was a continuation of the Saturday-morning cartoon. And it's brutal. It bumps off Optimus Prime 20 minutes in!
Helen: They needed to sell new toys. The thing we're giving them credit for as a bold storytelling move was, in fact, cynical. So I can't give them credit for that.
Chris: I have never done drugs, but I have done *The Transformers: The Movie*, and I imagine it's pretty much the same thing. It's demented.
Amon: It's so overtly silly that I tuned out as I was watching. I know Transformers fans who grew up with that movie, and it will be number one on their lists for nostalgia's sake.
Liam: I grew up with the Transformers, and I think *The Movie* distills what is special about the original creation. Seeing Optimus Prime die in that film had emotional impact. The fact he doesn't come back now seems insanely daring. And it has Orson Welles' final performance.
Helen: I genuinely struggled to get through it. I hated it. The music was terrible.
Chris: Including 'The Touch', the song Dirk Diggler records in *Boogie Nights*. In this movie, it's sung by Stan Bush, which ironically is what Dirk Diggler does.
Helen: Oh boy.
Chris: Let's talk last year's animated prequel, *Transformers One*, shall we?
Amon: I went back and forth on my top three for days.
Chris: And *Transformers One* won? Is that because you took the title as a suggestion?
Amon: No, because it's a quality-ass movie.
Chris: It's solid. It's good. It's a very well-made three-star film, and nothing more.
Amon: I think it's a very well-made four-star movie. Unlike most of *Transformers* 1986, there are no human characters.
Chris: 'Amon hates humans', is the one thing we can take away from this.
Amon: I'm here for Transformers. I'm here for robots. And *Transformers One* gives you that from the get-go. It's a story about friendship that feels emotional. I'm gutted it didn't do well enough to guarantee a 'Transformers Two'.
Helen: I like it a lot, but the heel-turn from D-16 into Megatron was just rushed.
Liam: That's my big problem with the movie.
Chris: Alright, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
LETTERS@EMPIREMAGAZINE.COM / @EMPIREMAGAZINE

THE LIST

1.
TRANSFORMERS (2007)

2.
BUMBLEBEE (2018)

3.
TRANSFORMERS: DARK OF THE MOON (2011)

4.
TRANSFORMERS ONE (2024)

5.
TRANSFORMERS: RISE OF THE BEASTS (2023)

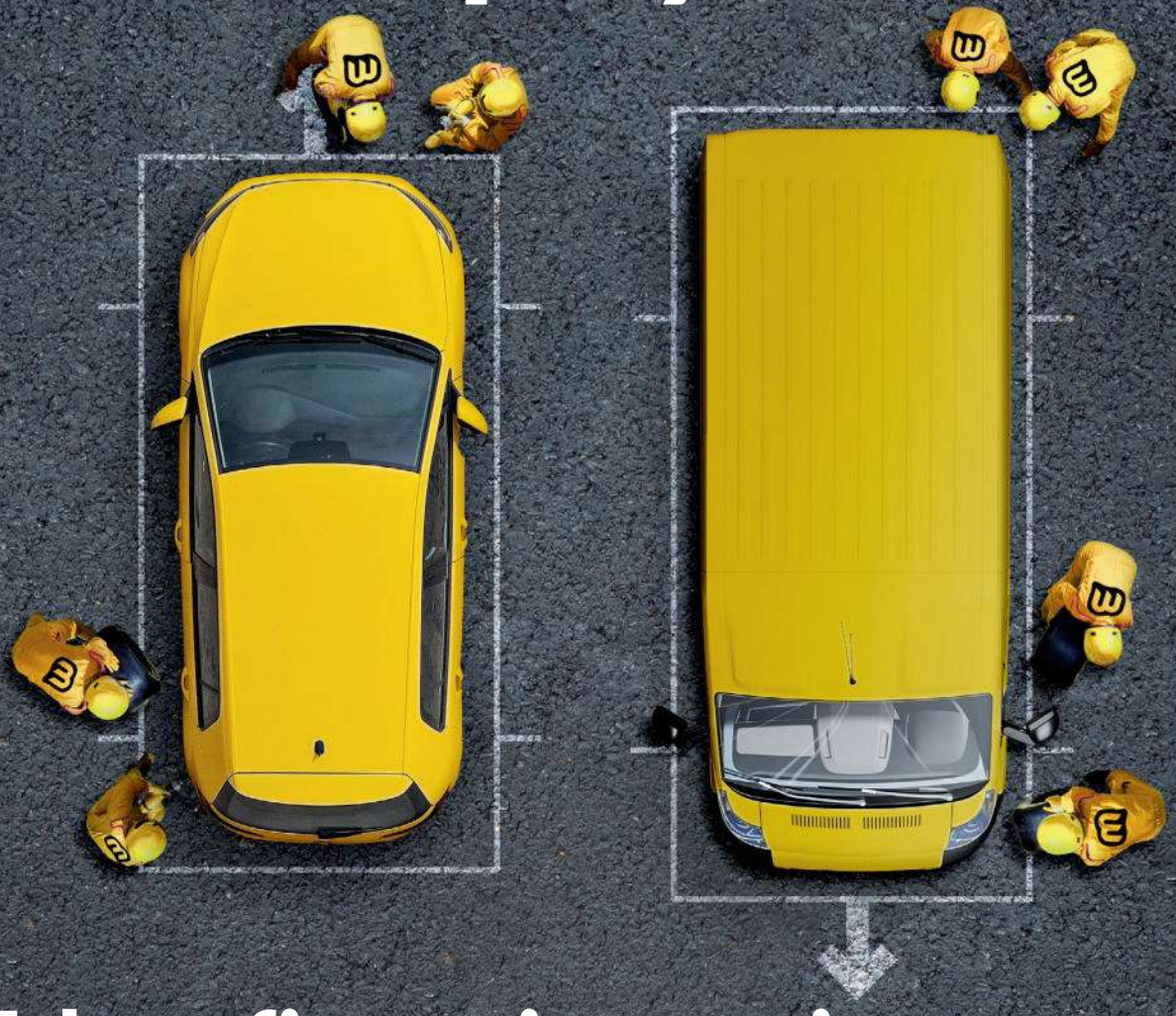
6.
THE TRANSFORMERS: THE MOVIE (1986)

7.
TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION (2014)

8.
TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN (2009)

9.
TRANSFORMERS: THE LAST KNIGHT (2017)

Car or van, work or play



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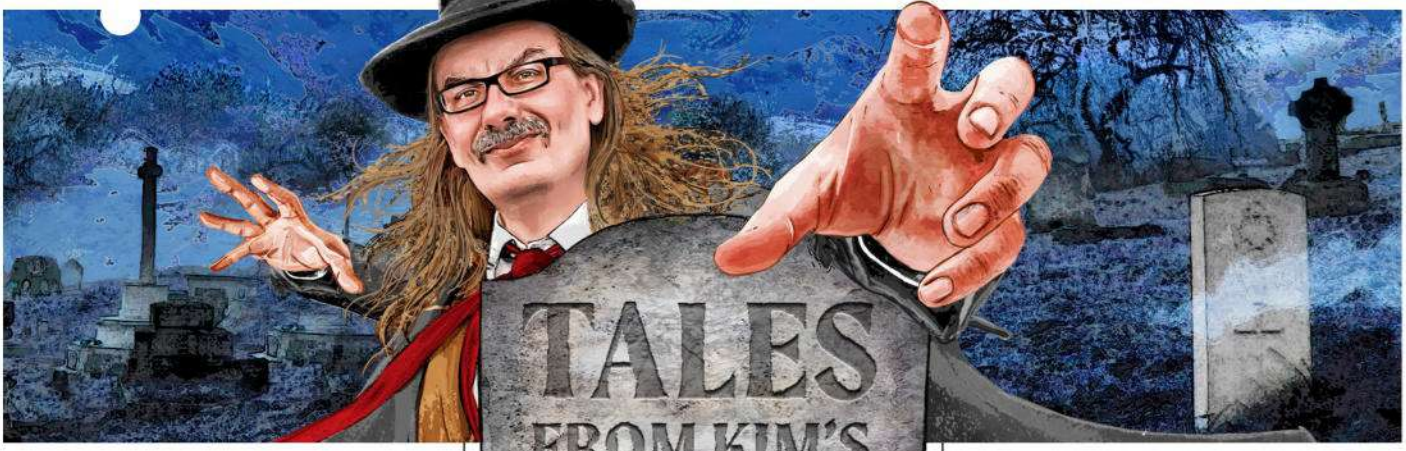


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

SOME MORE HANDY CINEMA RULES

• If they're still grinding out sequels to something, the time is not yet right to remake it.
• Small groups of folks trapped in a lift, stranded by an earthquake, surviving a nuclear holocaust or attacked by a hostile tribe will always include a pregnant woman. Codicil 1: no matter how far off her due date is, she will go into labour at the worst possible moment... Codicil 2: but the baby will be born healthy, so that's alright then — even if other casualties number in the millions.
• When someone in a horror movie opens a mirrored bathroom cupboard, there's a 99.8 per cent probability that closing the cupboard will make them see a scary-face rotting zombie in the mirror. Codicil 1: then there's a 25 per cent chance it won't be there when they turn around.
• Ice-picks, straight razors and samurai swords are relatively rare in the modern world, but multiple murders are often committed with these arcane objects. Codicil 1: whenever there's a string of these killings, five different suspects will own identical suspicious sharp implements.
• Any time a murder investigation or wacky comedy involves a visit to a Hollywood backlot, extras in costume are strolling around, with characters from different productions mingling. Codicil 1: the studio is as busy as it was in 1939, simultaneously shooting a Western with cowboys, a musical with showgirls, an *Arabian Nights* adventure with harem girls and a science-fiction film with rubber aliens.

Top: Ghostface somehow has perfect vision in *Scream* (2022). **Above:** Breathable air on *Return Of The Jedi*'s Endor.

• Psycho killers often wear masks or hoods with vision-limiting tiny eyeholes, yet manage to run about in the dark without tripping over cats or dustbins, then stab struggling victims with surgical precision.
• Martial-arts gurus harp on about their ancient tradition of pacifism and honour but demonstrate moves which would be classed as 'dirty fighting' in any playground.
• If a casting director gushes that your script would be "just right" for Kevin Sorbo and should be rushed to "his people", your dream project is in serious trouble.
• Whenever a *gringo* visits any country in Latin America, there's a fiesta going on, or else a revolution. Codicil 1: sometimes a revolution, followed by a fiesta. Codicil 2: in either case, the locals will fire off guns into the air and whoop.
• Memo to action/comic-book heroines: midriff-baring body-armour may look foxy, but probably wouldn't be a hell of a lot of use in a gun- or knife-fight.
• Rowdy saloons in Wild West towns insist on installing ludicrously expensive 20-foot-long ornamental mirrors behind the bar, even though the fragile, costly frippery is just begging to get smashed in the brawl-cum-shoot-out which erupts every ten minutes or so.
• The many planets visited in the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises have vastly different climates and life-forms, but all boast Earth-normal gravity and an atmosphere breathable by humans. Codicil 1: if you feel compelled to write in listing exceptions to the above rule, you might be possessed by Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons* and need to be exorcised.

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

BAGMAN
(DIGITAL)

Sam Clafin is terrified that his own childhood bogeyman — who carries an evil zipper-bag suitable for stuffing children into — has come for his own son, and that the kid has lost his only line of defence: a much-loved (if irritating) fetish object (a tuneless flute). Basic but effective creep material.

DARKGAME
(DIGITAL)

A masked gameshow host (Andrew P. Stephen) preens as he forces abductees to play brutal games on a darkweb streaming show and a detective with issues (Ed Westwick) seethes as he pursues him. A throwback to the darkish days circa 2008 of tied-to-a-chair-with-barbed-wire movies, but tolerably suspenseful.

FRIGHT
(DIGITAL)

Shot in cool black-and-white widescreen, Warren Dudley's horror is a spirited gothic charade. In 1937, agoraphobic Emily (Gwyneth Evans) can't leave her isolated house because her mother (Jill Priest) has raised her on a *Babadook*-like kids' book which has reinforced her neuroses. Bad things happen.

THINGS WILL BE DIFFERENT
(DIGITAL)

A lot of time-twisting films have appeared lately, so this title is hard to fulfil… but writer-director Michael Felker delivers new twists, not least that the sibling protagonists (Adam David Thompson, Riley Dandy) have chosen to enter a timewarp farmhouse to hide out after a robbery.

THE WELL
(DVD, DIGITAL)

Federico Zampaglione's Italian horror looks back to the gothic/romantic family-curse-in-a-castle pictures of the 1960s and the torture porn of about 15 years ago with equal fondness. Art restorer Lauren LaVera wipes soot off a haunted painting while something demonic seethes below.

STORY OF THE SHOT

Black Narcissus

CINEMA'S GREATEST MATTE PAINTING...?

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

THE ORIGIN

It was, according to its director Michael Powell, "the most erotic film that I have ever made". *Black Narcissus*, the lurid 1947 melodrama about sexually repressed nuns, features zero actual sex scenes — but as Powell wrote in his memoir *A Life In Movies*, there is "eroticism in every frame". That included this epic shot, depicting Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) ringing the bell of her convent at Mopu, high in the Himalayas, 8,000 feet above sea level. Torn between her sisterhood and her untamed passions, Ruth literally stands on a precipice — and this early scene also plays as a kind of 'Chekhov's Bell', foreshadowing the film's tragic clifftop climax.

The original 1939 novel by Rumer Godden described the palace-turned-convent as "always creaking and straining in the wind, with a sense of power and life of its own... with a bell placed on the gong posts, rusty and still". Emeric Pressburger's script — the first non-original work from the Powell & Pressburger partnership — stayed faithful to the book (though Godden supposedly never liked the film).

THE SHOOT

As astonishingly beautiful as this vision is, the grand vistas of the Himalayas were actually conjured a few miles north of, erm, Slough. Powell made the "Olympian decision" to film entirely at Pinewood Studios "in order to create and control the atmosphere from start to finish". Legendary cinematographer Jack Cardiff lit the film to give it cool, earthy tones, drawing inspiration from great painters like Vermeer and Caravaggio.

Further movie magic came from Alfred Junge's art department, and in particular the work of matte painter Walter Percy Day — nicknamed 'Poppa', as he would often employ his sons. Day was a true magician; he had apprenticed under the French silent-film pioneer Georges Méliès, and created many of the film's backdrops, painted directly onto glass and lined up with the live-action set, shots like this created entirely in-camera. "I was always dropping into Poppa Day's studio," recalled Powell. "It was like chatting with Jules Verne." So convincing were these matte paintings that — so the story goes — even viewers from Nepal were fooled. Although Byron was never more than a few feet off the ground.

Alamy, Imago

INSTANT TRIVIA

1
Kathleen Byron and her co-stars, Deborah Kerr and Jean Simmons, appeared in the same film again just six years later: 1953's *Young Bess*.

2
The National Legion Of Decency, a Catholic watchdog based in the States, called the film "an affront to religion and religious life". No word on whether they then added, "careful now" and "down with this sort of thing".

3
Another location used for the film was a garden in Horsham, West Sussex.

4
Byron was offered the role of Sister Ruth by telegram. Powell wrote, "We're offering you the part of Sister Ruth; the trouble is, you'll never get such a good part again!"

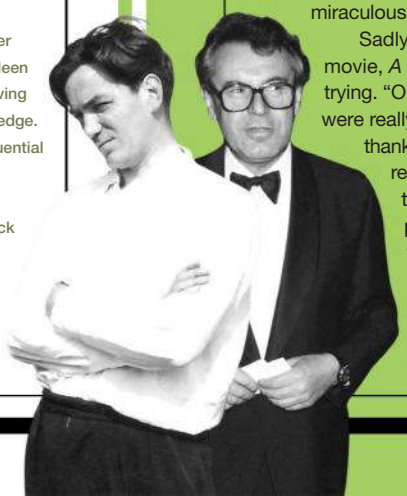
THE LEGACY

The shot became the centrepiece of many of the film's posters, becoming the film's defining, enduring image. (The 2020 BBC miniseries remake even recreated the shot, albeit via some less impressive CGI.) Jack Cardiff and Alfred Junge both won Oscars for their work on the film. Walter Percy Day, meanwhile, went on to train Peter Ellenshaw in the matte-painting technique — who in turn trained his son, Harrison Ellenshaw, responsible for perhaps the most famous matte paintings in cinema, in 1977's *Star Wars* and 1980's *Empire Strikes Back*.

For generations of filmmakers, *Black Narcissus* remains a huge inspiration — especially for Martin Scorsese, a lifelong champion of the piece. In 2024 documentary *Made In England: The Films Of Powell And Pressburger*, Scorsese praised the film's "painterly compositions", arguing: "This is truly a cinema of beautifully wrought image-making." Somebody tell Rumer Godden.

BLACK NARCISSUS **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

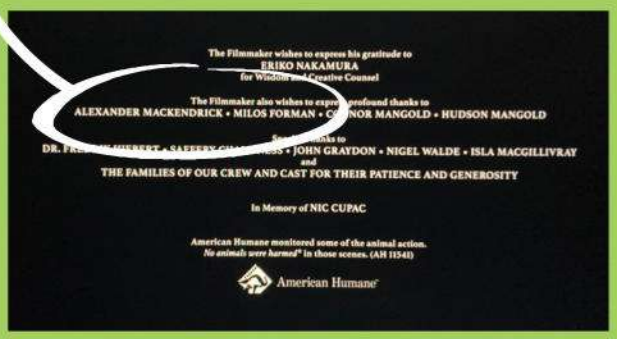
Main: Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) is living life on the edge. **Right:** Influential directors Alexander Mackendrick and Milos Forman.



SPECIAL THANKS TO...

ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK AND MILOS FORMAN

JAMES MANGOLD ON THE DEBT HE OWES TO THE TWO LEGENDARY DIRECTORS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ERIKO NAKAMURA
The Filmmaker also wishes to express profound thanks to
ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK • MILOS FORMAN • CONNOR MANGOLD • HUDSON MANGOLD
JOHN GRAYDON • NIGEL WALDE • ISLA MACGILLIVRAY
and
THE FAMILIES OF OUR CREW AND CAST FOR THEIR PATIENCE AND GENEROSITY
In Memory of NIC CUPAC
American Humane monitored some of the animal action.
No animals were harmed® in those scenes. (AH 11541)
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ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK, DIRECTOR of *The Ladykillers* and *Sweet Smell Of Success*, died in 1993. Milos Forman, director of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus*, passed in 2018. They will live on forever through their classic work, of course. But one man is determined to keep their memories alive another way, through the Special Thanks sections of his credits. That man is James Mangold, who has thanked them throughout his career, starting with his 1995 debut, *Heavy*, and more recently *Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny*. "Each was a teacher of mine," explains Mangold. "I met Mackendrick when I was 17 years old, and he was teaching at CalArts and became my mentor."

As for Forman, "I went to Columbia University in my late twenties," adds Mangold, "and it was under Milos' tutelage that I wrote my first feature, sending pages to him to read and mark up. Both were completely different kinds of filmmakers, but both were miraculously talented and really gifted at sharing their gifts."

Sadly, Mangold wasn't able to credit them on his new movie, *A Complete Unknown*. But it wasn't for the want of trying. "One of the ways Edward Norton and I bonded is we were really dear devotees of Milos," he says. "I would have thanked them in *A Complete Unknown*, but for whatever reason this particular production company has a rule that you can't thank anyone who wasn't paid on the picture. But I certainly would have thanked these two gentlemen again. I would all my life, if I can."

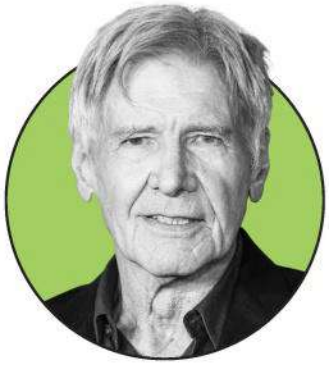
INDIANA JONES AND THE DIAL OF DESTINY **IS OUT NOW ON DISNEY+, DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL.** ***A COMPLETE UNKNOWN*** **IS IN CINEMAS NOW**

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

HARRISON FORD



1 In 1967 Western *A Time For Killing*, Ford was billed as 'Harrison J. Ford'. What does the 'J' stand for?

2 Ford got his big break working for George Lucas on 1973's *American Graffiti*. But in which film does he play a character called Lucas?

3 And what is the name of his character in *American Graffiti*?

4 What's Ford's highest-grossing movie at the worldwide box office?

5 Ford has been nominated only once for an Oscar, for Best Actor. For which movie?

6 Ford appeared once as Indy in an episode of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. Can you name the episode?

7 In which movie did Ford play legendary newsman-turned-were-hyena Mack Tannen?

8 What links River Phoenix and Anthony Ingruber?

9 Ford took over the role of Thaddeus 'Thunderbolt' Ross in the Marvel Cinematic Universe after the sad death of which actor?

10 That film marked the second time Ford played the President Of The United States Of America, after *Air Force One*. What was the name of that President?

11 Speaking of Presidents, Ford famously yells, "HOW DARE YOU, SIR!" at one in *Clear And Present Danger*. Who plays the President facing Ford's ire?

12 That marked the second, and final, time that Ford played Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan,

after *Patriot Games*. Both films were directed by the same filmmaker. Who was it?

13 It's an iconic monicker. But what is Indiana Jones' real name?

14 What is the first line we hear Ford say as Han Solo, captain of the Millennium Falcon, in *Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*?

15 And what is the final line Ford says in the *Star Wars* saga?

16 What is the name of the test that Rick Deckard administers to try to root out replicants in *Blade Runner*?

17 What is the significance of this sequence? 1935, 1936, 1938, 1957, 1969

18 In *The Fugitive*, Dr Richard Kimble is targeted because he's close to uncovering the truth about a dangerous new prescription drug. What is the name of that drug?

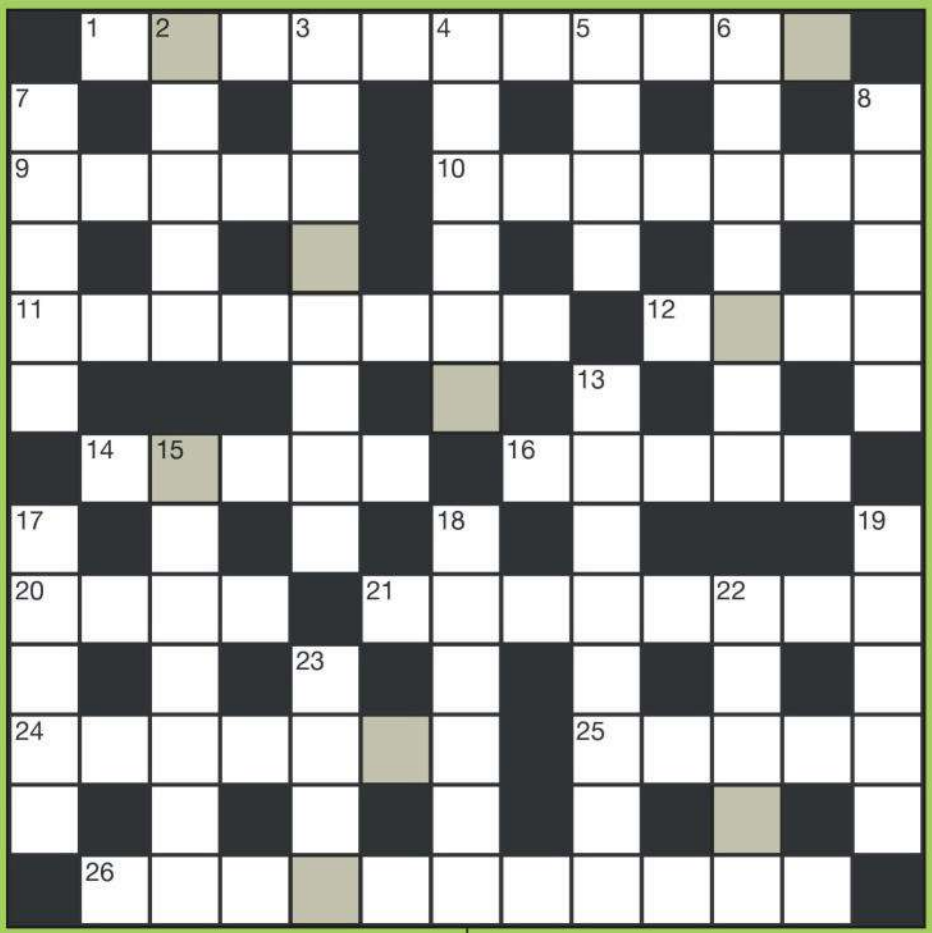
19 In which film is Ford's real-life scar explained away as the result of his character fainting and hitting his chin on a toilet while getting a pierced ear?

20 Ford and Steven Spielberg only worked together on one non-Indiana Jones film. Ford was then cut out of the theatrical version. What was the name of that movie?

ANSWERS 1 Nothing — he doesn't have a middle name **2** *Apocalypse Now*; he plays Colonel Lucas **3** Bob Falfa **4** *Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens*, with a cool $2 billion **5** *Witness* (1985) **6** 'Young Indiana Jones And The Mystery Of The Blues' **7** *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* **8** They've both played young versions of Ford, in *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* (1989) and *The Age Of Adaline* (2015) **9** William Hurt **10** James Marshall **11** Donald Moffat **12** Phillip Noyce **13** Henry Jones Jr **14** "Han Solo. I'm Captain of the Millennium Falcon." **15** "I know" — in *Star Wars: Episode IX — The Rise Of Skywalker* **16** The Voight-Kampff test **17** It's the years in which the Indiana Jones films principally take place (1912 and 1944 are also glimpsed) **18** Provasic **19** *Working Girl* **20** *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*

Imago

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Disney-owned film company that was once part of Fox (11)
9 Where Nicolas Cage appears in this scenario (5)
10 Robert, the *Dirty Dozen* director (7)
11 *The — Mr. Ripley* (Matt Damon film) (8)
12 Kamala, aka Ms Marvel (4)
14 A Samuel L. Jackson film from 2000 and a Samuel L. Jackson film from 2019 (5)
16 A Samuel L. Jackson film from 2019 that's a sequel to a Samuel L. Jackson film from 2000 (5)
20 It links a robot, hogs and strawberries (4)
21 Adam Sandler starred as one in a sports comedy (8)
24 Term meaning to dissolve to black, often used to end a screenplay (4,3)
25/6 Down Film musical based on a Lin-Manuel Miranda production (2,3,7)
26 His feature debut was *Fruitvale Station* (4,7)

DOWN

2 Marilyn Monroe's itchy co-star Tom (5)
3 Natasha, who was trained in the Red Room (8)
4 In which everything is fine, according to Lynch's Lady in the Radiator (6)
5 What his friends call Henry Jones Jr (4)
6 See **25 Across**
7 Dame Evans, famous for, "A handbag?" (5)
8 *The —* (Kurt Russell movie) (5)
13 This might describe a beauty or Russell Crowe's dogs (8)
15 Hepburn and Grant's third collaboration (7)
17 Taylor from *Amsterdam* (5)
18 It could be a preacher's love/hate or a dragon on one's back (6)
19 Sophia, who's been Lady Penelope and Madame de Pompadour (5)
22 *All About Eve*'s Davis (5)
23 "250,000 miles from home" began its tagline (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

THREE CRITERION TITLES

WE HAVE THREE new Criterion Collection titles for three winners in Crossword Corner this issue, all out in February for your classy-movie viewing pleasure. First up is landmark Western *Winchester '73* (out now), starring the legendary James Stewart, notable for its depiction of the Wild West as a no-man's-land of heroes and villains. Next is Paul Thomas Anderson's lauded *Punch-Drunk Love* (14 Feb). Starring Adam Sandler, Emily Watson and Philip Seymour Hoffman, it's a paean to new love. And finally, Joan Micklin Silver's *Crossing Delancey* (24 Feb) — an affectionate spin on the romantic comedy, and a love-letter to '80s Manhattan. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

ALL AVAILABLE TO BUY ON CRITERION COLLECTION 4K UHD

COMPETITION ENDS 10 MARCH

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 10 March. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

MARCH'S ANSWERS ACROSS: 7 Biloxi, **8** Kieran, **9** Buddy cop, **10** Reel, **11** Magneto, **13** Peele, **15** Shift, **17** Stepmom, **19** Iris, **20** Civil War, **22** Forest, **23** Niccol **DOWN: 1** Sisu, **2** Jordan, **3** Sin City, **4** Skip, **5** Pearce, **6** Waterloo, **12** Atherton, **14** Stevens, **16** Fisher, **18** Police, **20** Cuts, **21** Anon

ANAGRAM NOSFERATU

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 11 March or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Three winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

THE STAIRWELL SCENE

Nil By Mouth

CHOSEN BY **DANNY DYER**
(ACTOR)

Danny Dyer: "That one speech Kathy Burke's got on the stairway with Ray [Winstone] is something that any actor, whatever gender you are, should watch. And learn. It's incredible. She tells him straight and he becomes really submissive. And of course, they get back together [at the end of the film] and I'm assuming the cycle starts again. It's a brilliant piece of work."

Val (Kathy Burke), estranged from husband Ray (Ray Winstone) after he viciously beat her, leading her to miscarry, has entered the stairwell of her building to find Ray waiting with a present. It's her birthday.

RAY: You still love me?

VAL: Do I still love ya? (*Beat*) Why'd you do it, Ray?

RAY: (*Taken aback*) I do it... I did it, 'cause I love ya.

VAL: Well, that's your way of showing it, you're a sicker fucker than I thought you was. I mean, you want to get some fucking help, didn't ya?

RAY: Look, Val, Val. I'm gonna stop it. The booze... I will stop it.

VAL: Aw, change the record, for fuck's sake.

RAY: Look, if I could put me hand down me throat and pull me heart out, I'd give it to ya, you know I would. (*Silence*) She's performing again, the other one. Giving me plenty of grief.

VAL: Mary?

RAY: Yeah. She won't let me see me boy, so that's all starting up again. I suppose I'll be back in court. It's my turn to see him, I've gone round to pick him up, she ain't there. She's fucked off somewhere.

VAL: Where?

RAY: I don't know. I've been round her mother's, I've rung round. It's just another worry on me plate, innit, what with this and everything else.

VAL: Well, she's stupid, ain't she? 'Cause it only hurts the kid in the long run, don't it? I mean, I know you love that boy, Ray, you know, but you don't do yourself any favours—

RAY: I've never touched that boy.

VAL: No, I never said you did, did I? Right? But you do hurt people. And I've really thought about this, you know. I've really thought about you, right? And at the end of the day, the only person you're fooling is yourself. You ain't fucking taking the piss out of me no more. You're mugging you.

Ray sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

VAL: Found your picture.

RAY: What?

VAL: The one Billy took. (*Off his blank look*) Oh, I'm going indoors. It's a fucking mess.

RAY: How's your mum?

VAL: (*Turning to him*) Well, she's worried, ain't she? She's worried about Billy, she's worried about me.

RAY: Coming home?

VAL: We ain't got a fucking home to go back to, Ray. Everything in that place is fucking smashed! Jesus! I mean... I feel like you really must hate me.

RAY: I don't hate you.

VAL: Well, I don't feel loved. I mean, that ain't love. I mean, can't you see the mess we're in? Have you not, have you not noticed what we're like? I mean, we don't talk anymore...

A door opens. It's Val's mum (Laila Morse).

VAL: Just get inside, Mum, will ya? Just get in, I'm dealing with it. (*Her mum goes inside*) I mean, when you go out, you go out with your mates. And then when you are indoors, you're pissed out of your brains, asleep in front of the fucking television. I turn the television off, go up to bed, you follow me up at three o'clock in the morning stinking of booze. That's what I get. Either that, or you're knocking me about! You know, I'm 30 today. You know? And I feel so fucking old. You know? I'm so tired. You know, and I want to be able to look back and say, "Yeah, well, I had a bit of fun," you know, when I'm old, instead of saying, "Everyone felt fucking sorry for me!" I mean, that's the life I've got. Do you hear what I'm saying? (*Ray nods, barely*) I just don't want it. I'll, I'll find somebody else. Someone who can love me. Someone kind. (*Ray says nothing*)

VAL: I'll send Michelle your love.

She goes inside. Ray watches her go.

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